

Evil in the Spotlight: Identifying Supervillains as Gothic Protagonists in Superhero Films

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to analyse the figure of the supervillain, particularly with respect to the narrative of the superhero on film. The thesis identifies three different supervillains who, over the course of their respective narratives, took over the narrative that has been ascribed to the superhero. This phenomenon is established as having occurred in the past in Gothic literature. Thus, using the Gothic mode as the theoretical framework, the three supervillains are analysed for their role in narratives that feature them as antagonists, and ones that feature them as protagonists.

The thesis contains a narrative analysis of three supervillains, Thanos, the Joker and Harley Quinn. By examining their multiple appearances, and thus understood as mobile signifiers, a live-action film that serves as an origin story forms the main text of analysis in each chapter. Finding elements of the Gothic in these contemporary supervillains, this thesis performs three tasks. One, it shows the continued flexibility of the superhero genre – that despite being presented in a format different from how it was initially introduced, the genre was able to take liberties with characters and typify them into multiple pre-existing tropes. Second, the thesis revels in the continued relevance of Gothic literature, a genre that finds home in multiple popular discourses. Finally, the thesis identifies the gendered nature of the superhero narrative to be at odds when analysing the figure of Harley Quinn, and thus a Female Gothic plot is activated to analyse Quinn's solo narrative.

The focus of this thesis is on how supervillains have appropriated the narratives of their respective films. This study opens doors to multiple variations of similar analyses and to a greater understanding of the superhero genre and its flexibility.

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Introduction

Film and comics have shared an intricate relationship for many years. The comic's visual method and the film's visual medium offer a convenient starting point for identifying parallels in the two industries (Christiansen 107, Lefevre 1). The differences complicate this relationship, as a comic presents a still image, while films are in constant motion – either through movement or through narrative.¹ It is not the aim of this thesis to understand and complicate this relationship between film and comics, rather this study takes the relationship as a given. That film and comics are mutually inspired by each other in terms of content and technique is not a groundbreaking concept, but considering the importance that both media place on sequential storytelling, the narrative capabilities that both media utilise to adapt and borrow techniques from each other forms a sizeable source of academic inquiry (Gardner 2).²

Adaptations in general are complicated by nature. Adapting any text from one medium to another invites critical thought to both texts, the new and the old, with authorial intent playing a major role in the adapted text.³ These factors result in the new adapted text taking on a life and meaning of its own, becoming a new text that was *adapted* from another. When comparing the two, critical thought would highlight similarities, differences and what these similarities and differences could signify in the context of each of the two texts (Lefevre 2). Such studies are undertaken in the multitudes, especially in the current media landscape where a text has the potential to become Intellectual Property (IP), owned by a corporation to be disseminated as and when necessary (Johnson 4–5). Business houses dedicated to the production of narratives for an IP become the main focus, with a franchise spanning films,

¹ Christiansen goes into detail about the comparisons and complications between the two formats (107-119).

² Lefevre's essay of the two formats discusses the two distinct formats and their adaptive properties (2007).

³ 'Authorial intent' refers to the mode of production that goes into making a film, which necessitates a team of producers rather than the smaller team it takes to make a comic and the singular experience of reading one (Lefevre 3).

television series, novels, comics, video games and other tools of mass entertainment that are marketed and sold (Johnson 31, Kinder 47, Meehan 56).

Concepts of IP and franchising are contemporary products of the late twentieth century, which exist alongside the accompanying threat of the ‘challenge to choice, diversity and creativity posed by their mechanist, almost viral drive toward self-replication’ (Johnson 2). However, echoes of such self-replicating behaviour can easily be traced into history, which is what this thesis aims to do. Authors have experimented with the characters they created, with their generic tropes, and with genres themselves, thereby introducing the essentiality of a narrative trope – the term trope is defined here as ‘a universally identified image imbued with several layers of contextual meaning creating a new visual metaphor’ (Rizzo)⁴. These multiple narratives – transmedia, interlinked as they are – offer opportunities to explore a genre and its flexibility to accommodate tropes from other genres. Such generic flexibility introduces new ways of looking at a trope that might have been taken for granted otherwise.

When examining the multiplicity of a text like that of Batman, scholar Jim Collins notes how, at one point, specifically around the release of *Batman* (1989, dir. Tim Burton), multiple other narratives featuring the same character were released or activated. Within months of each other, comic books, graphic novels and music videos were released into the public consciousness across media platforms. Such a text then becomes a hybrid text, one that can ‘move across genres, mixing different forms of discourse as well as different media’, thereby altering their traditional mode of circulation (Collins 165). This is most evident in Gothic texts, where a fictional tale becomes horrific by focusing on the melodrama,⁵ on the protagonists’

⁴ For example, a visual metaphor would come into being upon repeated uses of a particular image, with layers of meaning added upon its extended usage. As Rizzo explains, ‘in film semiology, “a rose is love is death” is a trope – a more complex image’ (Rizzo).

⁵ The definition of melodrama as adopted by this thesis is from Peter Brooks’ *The Melodramatic Imagination*, which he describes as a mode rather than a genre, and ‘refuses to content itself with the repressions, the tonings-down, the half-articulations, the accommodations, and the disappointments of the real’ (ix). This concept is discussed further on page 53.

heightened mental states and on the terror emanated by the Gothic villain. But even more, Gothic texts are known to indulge in paratextual material by authenticating their fictional narratives through fake authenticity documents or by being published anonymously and thereby ‘framing’ their narratives (Punter, *The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 49; Hogle, ‘The Gothic at the Turn of the Century’ 154). Analysing such hybridity in Gothic texts allows for wider application of the ideas and tropes utilised by both the Gothic mode and the superhero narrative.

The thesis sets out to analyse three superhero films, namely *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), *Joker* (2019) and *Birds of Prey and the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn* (2021). The central argument of this thesis is that in the three films mentioned above, the evil supervillains become the main focus of the narratives, which have, more often than not, traced the journey of the good superheroes. The thesis uses the methodology of narrative analysis to examine the techniques utilised by the filmmakers to undertake this task. Using the Gothic mode as a theoretical framework, this thesis has been able to understand this phenomenon in a historical context, finding that such narratives, focused on supervillains, are not exclusive to the superhero genre. By understanding the narrative actants (characters) as mobile signifiers,⁶ this thesis has been able to trace the forms of villainy – displayed by the supervillains in their individual texts – to the Gothic tradition.

This chapter aims to set the boundaries that limit the focus of this study. For this, a history of comic and film, and a history of heroism and villainy, is elaborated upon to the extent that is essential. This historical context aims not only to place in context the limits of this study, but also to trace similarities between the development of the two main narratives that this thesis examines – that of the Gothic and the superhero. Over the course of this analysis, it becomes evident that the two have much in common, allowing for the Gothic to be utilised as a

⁶ Defined in this thesis on page 9.

theoretical framework through which the superhero narrative is activated. The focus on the importance of narrative forms the backbone of the thesis through the chapters, as this study observes how certain villains become the protagonists of narratives that have historically been piloted by heroes. An elaborate explanation of what narrative is, what it means in the context of this study and how it is used as a tool through the three chapters is also delineated. And while narrative theory aids in analysing the film texts themselves, this study takes a post-structuralist approach to understand the figure of the supervillain. Keeping in mind the hybridity of the texts taken up for study by this thesis, the idea of a floating signifier, or a mobile signifier, is used to understand the supervillain in the context of its historicity. Finally, the chapter introduces the three supervillains, and the texts they appear in forming the core of this thesis. While each of the supervillains has had multiple appearances in live-action film, this thesis chooses one text to showcase how each of the supervillains takes the narrative helm upon themselves.

This thesis intervenes into the field of superhero studies, identifying three films that enact the superhero narrative in varied ways. In their variation, this thesis identifies the Gothic mode as being a major source of inspiration, and a connecting thread utilised to analyse the three films is chosen for analysis. The superhero narrative, as will be delineated below, has succeeded in using genre as a source of inspiration for the purpose of their narratives. The filmic adaptations of the original comic books – which prioritise the spatial expansion of transmedia world building over temporal displacement of adaptation – have continued this trend of genre hybridity, allowing for multiple influences to inform their narratives. In doing so, the supervillains of the three films chosen are considered unique for re-enacting specific archetypes originated or popularised by the Gothic mode, which is why they have been selected for this study. Further, this thesis intervenes by analysing the three supervillains as mobile signifiers – figures who have taken on new ways of being analysed as long as they have

continued to exist, while still retaining the core characteristics that originated from their respective comic/televisual origins. Such an intervention allows for these three, and more, supervillains to be read as more than the sum of their parts, considering each character's history to be as essential to their individual outings as the individual outings themselves.

Research Questions and Methodology

This thesis has four core questions, which are as follows:

1. How is the figure of the supervillain able to be at the helm of a narrative that has predominantly focused on the superhero?
2. What historical context, with an emphasis on the Gothic, is available for a genre so dependent on multiple precedents, and how do Thanos, the Joker and Harley Quinn figure into the precedent set?
3. How do their individual film texts then express their villainy while also creating convincing characters, without reducing the supervillains to archetypes by which they are usually defined?
4. What, if any, are the effects of gender on the narratives being analysed, particularly considering that Quinn is the only female supervillain to have received as much narrative focus as the other two?

The primary intention of this thesis is to understand how supervillains function, and the tendency of certain supervillains to overtake narratives that have traditionally served the purpose of reinstating the idea of good dominating evil. Towards this end, a basic understanding of the history of such mythic ideas is explored. The origin of such ideas could arguably be traced back to biblical texts in the West, and the respective mythological texts in Hinduism and Buddhism that have strong roots in the East. The names of heroes and the evils

each hero comes across vary according to the tradition, but the one constant is that good would always conquer evil. These methods of myth making became such an essential part of human consciousness that Roland Barthes, among others, would begin to theorise the durability of such narratives. Barthes understands such myths as a message to be communicated, and therefore as ‘a mode of signification, a form’ (Barthes 107). This idea of narrative as a mode of signification becomes essential when utilising the Gothic text as well.

The Gothic forms the theoretical framework for this understanding of supervillains based on one very simple, and yet intricately complex, principle – that the Gothic deals intimately with the ‘identification, emulation and a perpetuation of the evils’ perceived to be haunting the regular middle class (Botting, *The Gothic* 2) (the effect of Gothic texts on class status in society will be discussed further ahead in the chapter). Gothic narratives, as will be elaborated below, were born out of a need to capture a certain history while also enjoying a ‘self-conscious unrealism’, the result of which allowed for this conflicted mode of literature to anchor itself through ‘floating signifiers’ as it developed (Punter, *The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 4; Hogle, ‘The Gothic at Our Turn of the Century’ 156). Elements and tropes like terror, horror, nostalgia, the abject, the heroine and the villain – terms that will be defined and discussed below – have been modified with each activation to suit the narrative they were being utilised in. This conflicted mode of literature has proven itself capable of being used as a framework under which other texts can be analysed. Thus, though the Gothic mode’s spatial constriction⁷ may be considered a challenge when analysing the expansive superhero narrative, this thesis shows that as a mode, the Gothic has also displayed its elasticity in its ability to confront contemporary cultural anxieties. For the Gothic, these cultural anxieties overwhelm, whereas for the

⁷ The Gothic mode’s association with claustrophobia is intrinsic, with Wasson stating that ‘Gothic often hinges on representing the experience of a space as claustrophobic and imprisoning’ (132).

superhero narrative, the cultural anxieties are embodied in supervillains to be punched out by the superheroes. This leads us to the question of the superhero text.

The intention of this thesis is to gain an understanding of the work that has been done so far and thereby to situate a Gothic understanding of supervillains. The term ‘supervillain,’ in particular, is found to be an all-encompassing term to define any antagonistic character who opposes the protagonist. Peter Coogan’s seminal study of superheroes and supervillains allotted specific definitions of the two as well as typifying specific villains to specific archetypes (61). However, as this study will find, the term is fluid in nature. Tomabechi is of the opinion that supervillains are ‘culturally informative figures that foster debate’ and questions the binaries of known and unknown (5). Such an encompassing view allows for multiple terms, including the anti-hero, to be read as antagonistic (defined as ‘an important opponent’ whom the protagonist is ‘pitted against’ (Abrams and Harpham 294)). This thesis uses the term anti-hero sparsely, and mostly to characterise Harley Quinn – as the term relates more to the intention of the criminal acts than the nature of criminality itself. Further discussion of the term anti-hero reveals its intrinsic ties to the Gothic mode and how it applies in this thesis.⁸

Further, this thesis examines the film adaptations of comics, not the comics themselves. As this chapter will investigate, film and comics have worked in parallel to develop their respective forms, while also liberally borrowing content and certain stylistic frames from each other (Burke notes how the Dutch angle⁹ has been utilised by both formats, 230). When studying the adaptation of a text, and not the text itself, multiple complications arise. In the field of adaptation studies, the notion of fidelity has been a source of contention in adaptations of novels to films, until recent studies deemed the concept ‘essentialist’, with Stam noting how fidelity assumes an ‘extractable essence’ that must be transferred (76). However, the innately

⁸ Further discussion of this term can be found on page 38, and in Chapters 1 and 3, which explicitly engage with the term ‘anti-hero’ and its relation to the characters discussed.

⁹ A Dutch angle, or a Dutch tilt (also called a canted angle) indicates a shot when the camera tilts horizontally and/or vertically, usually to indicate a character’s unbalanced mental state (Sikov 13).

visual nature of comic books allows for their seemingly easy transference onto film – there is after all a reason why some of the earliest film serials were adapted from comic strips.¹⁰

It is the sequential nature of comic books that complicates matters when adapting material from one form to the other. Scholars have discussed the challenges that arise in adapting comic books into film, among whom Leitch notes that ‘though their individual panels are more likely to correspond to individual shots ... [comic books] comprise [a] discontinuous tableaux rather than streaming video’ (194). While comic books and film share a visual aspect to their medium, there is the distinct difference in the fact that films are, as Leitch points out, ‘an audiovisual medium; comics a lexicovisual medium’ – lexicovisual referring to the unique visual language that comic books have developed since their inception (194). Corrigan suggests that comic book film adaptations become ‘repositories themselves for adaptations that respond to the unique representational overlap between source and adaptation’ (Burke, ‘Adaptation Studies Conference’, 55). This is because as much as films have sourced material from comic books, superhero comic books have also been implementing film material into their canon – whether it be narrative, character designs or any such similar stylistic flourishes. For example, the release of the film *Batman* (1989) was accompanied with a comic book version of the same film. Marvel Comics is particularly well known for appropriating narrative beats or character designs from their more popular film counterparts. One of the subjects of this thesis, Harley Quinn was first introduced on an animated television show and was later brought into the main canon of the comic books.

The popularity that the superhero narrative celebrates further complicates the discussion of adaptation. Martin Zeller-Jacques astutely notes that the immense material surrounding the superhero, from comic books to films to television shows to radio programmes, advertisements,

¹⁰ *L'Arroseur Arrose* (1895) is potentially the first adaptation based on a comic strip, directed by the Lumiere Brothers (Burke 3).

toys, video games and novels, all of which ‘comprise even a moderately well-established superhero’s textual history’, creates more challenges in adapting it to add to the superhero narrative (143). The relationship between the two media is not as simple as one novel text being adapted based on one specific reading of that text (Stam 80). Further, superhero texts have come to this high level of public consciousness by pervading multiple modes of media, each mode participating in a certain part of the superhero’s myth-making. By existing in this ‘ongoing cycle of multimedia production, which continually contests and revises’ texts, any addition to the superhero narrative potentially ‘complicate[s] the processes underlying [its] own creation’ (Zeller-Jacques 144).

The vast amount of material from which to adapt then inevitably leads to notions of infidelity (Leitch 196) and invites instead the concept of intertextuality. Gerrard Genette discusses the idea of ‘transtextuality’, referring to ‘all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts’, and one of the ways to form such relations, Genette states, is through the notion of intertextuality (Genette 1). Genette borrows the term from Julia Kristeva, for whom intertextuality implied contextualising a novel in its environment and history. For Kristeva, intertextuality refers to a text ‘in dialogue with other texts’ (Letche, ‘Language, Literature and the Founding Murder ...’). Genette defines it as the ‘effective co-presence between two texts or among several texts’ as either quotation, plagiarism or allusion (Genette 1–2). For Stam, then, intertextuality aids in transcending the contradictions of fidelity (81). He opines that no one text serves as the single source, instead through the concept of ‘intertextual dialogism ...

the infinite and open-ended possibilities generated by all the discursive practices of a culture, the entire matrix of communicative utterances within which a text is situated ... reach the text not only through recognizable influences, but also through a subtle process of dissemination’ (81).

For Cartmell also, intertextuality is essential to the study of adaptations ‘for their generation of a plurality of meanings’, declaring that the search for ‘an original or for a single author is no longer relevant in a postmodern world where a belief in a single meaning is seen to be a fruitless quest’ (28). Hutcheon studies intertextuality through adaptation as a ‘*process of reception*’, stating, ‘we experience adaptations (*as adaptations*) as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation’ (8; original emphasis). Indeed, this is quite evident in the multiple reiterations that Brooker notes occurred in introducing the myth of the Batman between the character’s introduction in 1938 and the film adaptations in the late 1990s. For Brooker, these ‘rewritings’ were enabled by the freedom offered to auteur comic artists and writers during the 1980s: Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns*, Moore’s *The Killing Joke* and Morrison’s *Arkham Asylum* were all released around the same period, and yet offered different readings of the Batman with different endings for the Joker (193). Brooker finds that this was enabled by ‘the increasing discourse of authorship around graphic novels which permitted (even encouraged) a certain amount of play with the “mythos”’ (193).

Zeller-Jacques notes how superhero comic book films have focused on ‘the appealing microtext of the special-effects driven blockbuster’, selectively drawing upon the iconic microtext¹¹ of costumes, powers, team-ups and villains (148). Leitch similarly finds that ‘[a]s a genre, comic-book adaptations concentrate less on visuals’, referring to the drawn artwork that have originated comic-book superheroes, choosing to focus on the superhero’s personality, the morality of their world and ‘the nature of the trademark villains who distinguish so many superhero franchises’ (200). With the superheroes on film thus reduced to their iconic signifiers, it only aids this study to dig deeper into this mode of enquiry. While adaptation

¹¹ Zeller-Jacques here uses Thomas Leitch’s term, where he describes a microtext through the treatment of a narrative as multiple texts, not because they exist in more than one telling, but because of their divisibility into microtexts, ‘any one of which is available to authenticate any other, or indeed any invented incident’ (56).

studies have thus far proved to be quite expansive, a look at the superhero narrative as a whole entity, rather than stemming from a specific enquiry, is almost impossible given the multitudinous interpretations and variations that are now second nature to this genre. This study then focuses on three specific characters. It attempts to understand the oeuvre of their existence to identify the Gothic mode in their supervillainy. Here, the study examines the concept of a character as the mobile signifier.

The notion of the mobile signifier is post-structuralist, originating from Lacan's idea of a '*point de capiton*' in his understanding of the construction of gender relations and identities. He stresses the importance of an anchoring point, of certain dominant signifiers, corresponding to 'the empirical fact of the dominance of the letter in the dramatic transformation that the dialogue may bring about' in a discussion (Lacan and Wilden 240).¹² For Lacan, rather than the chaos of the infinite sliding of meaning between signifier and signified, certain privileged signifiers button down the system of language, like buttons pinning down the upholstery at certain points (Lacan and Wilden 273). This *point de capiton* furnishes fixed anchoring points of meaning in relation to which the potentially infinite circulation of meaning within language can be stopped. The meaning of each anchor is buttoned down, 'not to its signified but by referring it to the central coordinating signifier through which its relationship to other signifiers, and hence to the signified, is organised' (Bennett and Woollacott 297; Lacan and Wilden 240). The meaning then is not in the signifier itself, but constructed through referral with other signifiers, arriving at its signified meaning ultimately.

For Lacan, the symbolic refers to the 'unconscious order', designating 'a symbolic structure based on a linguistic model composed of a chain of signifiers' (Lacan and Wilden 270). His notion of the symbolic order depends upon the law of the father – thus creating the

¹² Lacan's work was with schizophrenics, and his efforts to establish certain dominant signifiers were to enable his patients to recognise certain terms – 'signifiers' – to describe their experiences – the 'signified' (Lacan and Wilden 273).

notion of the symbolic father, or the name-of-the-father, which he ascribes to the signifier in a linguistic model (Lacan and Wilden 270). Thus, when discussing the symbolic father and the castration complex, Lacan asserts that the child ‘takes on the phallus as signifier’, thus forming a point of anchorage to which the boy’s identity is constructed (Bennett and Woollacott 297; Lacan and Wilden 240).¹³ Bennett and Woollacott expand this idea, since these points of anchorage allow for signifiers to be attached to their signifieds ‘through the relations of similarity and difference’, marking their positions in relation to the *points de capiton* (297). They apply this idea to the phallically coded character of James Bond, a character who, they find, ‘furnished a point of anchorage in relation to which the sliding of meaning that had been introduced into the ideological ordering of gender relations ... was moved on and pinned down to a new set of ideological coordinates’ (Bennett and Woollacott 35–36). Just as they theorise that ‘the figure of Bond has been differently constructed at different moments’ in the character’s lifespan, so does Collins note such a phenomenon with the figure of the superhero, but specifically with the Batman (Bennett and Woollacott 42; Collins 167).

For Collins, the two are differentiated in their rearticulation, as Collins specifically looks at the Batman as activated by director Tim Burton, and comic writers Frank Miller, Grant Morrison and Alan Moore’s work on the superhero narrative with *Watchmen* (167). The Batman, for Collins, is ‘subject to further rearticulation as [he] circulate[s] through disparate cultures, or more accurately, different micro-cultures’ (167). Each introduction of the Batman in *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Batman* is different. Whereas the former begins the narrative with an older Batman, the latter explores a younger Batman; yet both reiterate the same narrative of Batman and the Joker. Such texts, Collins finds, reconfigure the ‘already-said’, moving across genres, engaging in different forms of discourse and media, and thereby altering

¹³ Lacan adds that this phase is relatively simple for girls, whereas it is not the case for boys (Lacan and Wilden 240). These gender implications are considered later in the text.

the ‘traditional mode of circulation’ (165). These narratives, along with *Watchmen*, also engage with disparate narrative and visual codes, involving journal entries, television or newspaper reports, a shift from first person to third person narration and more (Collins 165). This treatment of the superhero narrative is particularly reminiscent of the Gothic, with its own endemic fakery – fake documents placing the Gothic story in ‘reality’ – which Hogle finds makes the Gothic mode focus on ‘floating signifiers’ as it has developed (‘The Gothic at Our Turn of the Century’ 156).

The supervillains at the centre of this thesis, then, are examined as mobile signifiers. Each of the three characters – Thanos, the Joker and Harley Quinn – comes from a long history across media, and, as mobile signifiers, they have performed specific roles in the texts they have been written into. These three characters have been chosen for this study for the simple fact that they have managed to do what multiple other supervillains could not: they have a filmic narrative text dedicated to themselves. Their long histories allow for these characters, when studied in film, to have a rich characterisation – where most villains are reduced to their archetypes in superhero narratives, these three supervillains are able to break out of their archetype and present a larger threat. Their origin stories in their respective medium – comic book for Thanos and the Joker and television show for Harley Quinn, and certain specific comic books essential to understanding their villainy – are briefly examined. The purpose of such brief examination, rather than in-depth analysis, is to gain a basic understanding of how these characters are portrayed, and what moments in their narrative history have had significant lasting effects on their villainy. This thesis locates the points of anchorage of these characters in their comic book counterparts, thereby identifying the visual signifier or trademark nature (which, as mentioned above, Leitch (194) notes is one of the few aspects in superhero adaptations) of these villains that has carried over into their film adaptations.

In terms of genre, both the Gothic mode and supervillain narratives have an established set of conventions that each narrative follows, which have come to serve as identifying markers for the same. However, when discussing the superhero narrative in film, it becomes essential to keep in mind the multiple influences that have always contributed to the success of this mode of storytelling. While Coogan chooses to define a superhero genre by reducing conventions – plot, setting, theme, character, icon – to their ‘minimum’ and identifying the genre by ‘the character’, such a method negates the multiple influences that superhero narratives have taken on (Coogan 24). Claiming generic status in a hybrid narrative raises more questions than answers (Taylor, ‘Genre and Superhero Cinema’ 94–98). For example, Verstraten aptly notes that when understood as consisting of ‘conventions’ based on ‘consensus’, genre is ‘a more or less stable foundation that is constantly shifting nonetheless’ (176).

This thesis then understands genre as open to change, hybrid, ‘expansive, and fluid’ (Taylor 101). Superhero narratives have easily incorporated other genres into its fold, with Flanagan and colleagues’ notion of a ‘genre fractal’ aiding in understanding the MCU’s interpretation of genre hybridity (88). Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone’s genre fractal is defined as ‘a miniaturized replica, a repeat of the pattern in a scaled-down form ... to help carry the meaning of a text derived from superhero fiction in a way that meshes it with filmic value’ (88). James C. Taylor further states that this strategy ‘gives each film its own identity within a unifying structure’ (139). Taylor is of the opinion that contemporary superhero films are clever byproducts of ‘earlier, less grandiose media formations’ (94).¹⁴ Such an understanding of genre then helps place the superhero films analysed by this thesis in a historical context, of genres being reactivated and reformulated to suit the narrative through ‘cataloguing and recall’ (Connor 527).

¹⁴ Examples of such superhero films would be *Batman* (1989), which sets a superhero narrative in a Gothic inspired city; *Thor* (2011), which introduces mythical stories and Shakespearean drama into a superhero narrative. More examples of such hybridized superhero narratives are discussed in Chapter 1.

For each character, one film is analysed as the main text to understand how their villainy aids them in taking the narrative lead to essentially become the actant of the film. This thesis takes narrative as the main methodology to study the three films, with narrative being defined as the ‘linear, temporal sequence of actions and events carried out by characters that form a self-enclosed, unified whole’ (Buckland 12). When analysing the narrative of a film, a medium in which the identity of the narrator is a much-contested field of discussion,¹⁵ Verstraten’s understanding of the filmic narrator clarifies a method to study filmic narratives. For him, filmic narration primarily consists of showing moving images, with editing and sound optional, and this act of enunciation, or ‘filmic showing’, is never neutral (Verstraten 8). Verstraten states that there exists a narrative agent ‘responsible for who or what can be seen, for locating the characters in a certain space’ (Verstraten 8). The actant then, is abstract for Verstraten, and should be considered relative to the goal that the fabula (that is, the chronological reconstruction of the events according to causal logic) requires in the narrative (12). However, for Buckland the actant is a simple concept, referring to actant as ‘an agent that carries out an action’ and characters as ‘actantial roles’ (12). Conceding to that abstract nature of the actant, Buckland also agrees that the same role or function could be carried out by multiple characters, or non-human forces; just as a single character can manifest in multiple roles (Buckland 12). The function, or narrative function, of an actant is defined by Buckland as the actions performed by the actants, which are ordered into an internally cohesive structure in the narrative (Buckland 12). The three supervillains then are analysed based on their actantial roles, as mobile signifiers in their previous iterations and as filmic narrators in their individual films.

The rationale for adopting a method of narrative analysis to analyse the film texts is to understand the film’s role in the supervillain’s ability to become the primary subject of the

¹⁵ Verstraten traces the various debates, noting Bordwell’s ideas of an absent film narrator, Brannigan’s concept of non-focalized narration and Chatman’s reliance on the implied author as the source of textual intention (6).

narrative (the subject of the narrative is defined as the one who carries out action and strives for a specific object; Greimas 147–148, 202–203). The structural roles that have been defined by narrative analysts to understand how the narrative progresses and what elements aid in this progress are used to analyse how these three films utilise the structural roles. What does the title of the ‘villain’ mean if the main focalizer of the film has an immoral set of values? Narrative analysis in film is highly dependent on the focalizer of that text, either internal or external. By placing an evil actant as the focalizer of the film text, the film then occupies a unique position of having to reinforce the narrative presented, which these selected films do by placing secondary actants to either support or contrast the stance taken by its primary subject. This method of utilising multiple actants, or several focalizers in the case of *Infinity War* and *Birds of Prey*, to present contrasting or supporting perspectives allows for the narrative development in unique ways, contributing to the study’s aim of proving the supervillains to be more than their archetypes.

Further, narrative analysis allows for the study of certain formal elements of these films that go beyond narrative elements in the strict sense of the term, but still add significantly to the narrative of the film. For example, Marvel Studios has incorporated the opening credits of the film as a part of the film’s narrative. Each film’s opening credits celebrate the achievements of the studio, displaying a self-congratulatory sequence of scenes from previously successful comic books, films and television shows. Upon hitting the tenth-year anniversary, the number ‘10’ was incorporated into the studio’s logo. Similarly, *Birds of Prey* celebrates Harley’s comic and television history with an animated recap of the events that have characterised her as a supervillain. For Chatman, the text begins ‘at the beginning *it* chooses (the first page, the opening shots of the film, the overture, the rising curtain)’ (7, original emphasis). Brinker also adds that in *The Incredible Hulk* (2008, dir. Louis Leterrier), the opening credits of the film set

the mood for the rest of the film while paying homage to previous iterations of the character on film and television (221).

While the method of analysis of each of the texts undertaken by this thesis is the narrative of the film itself, some of the analyses begin with the reception the film by critics at the time of their release. Naturally, this clashes with the inherent requirement of the analysis to be purely narrative based; yet this thesis does not use the critical responses as parts of the narrative texts themselves. Instead, the intention to include that additional information is to provide context for the social and cultural climate that accompanied the release of the films. The critical responses to the films provide ‘a historical explanation of the activities of interpretation’ that took place at the time of their release, and as will be evident in the analysis of the Joker, most immediate academic responses to the film perform similar tasks – that of providing a ‘historical explanation’ (Staiger 8). While the critical responses themselves have little to do with the analysis of the films conducted as a part of this thesis, I argue that the responses will add to the coherence of the texts, making the cultural climate in which they were produced more relevant.

It becomes essential at this point to discuss the effects of transmedia narration and how the three film texts analysed in this thesis are negotiated. Though it has been defined and redefined multiple times, transmedia storytelling essentially refers to ‘a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels’ to generate a ‘unified and coordinated entertainment experience’ (Jenkins, ‘Transmedia Storytelling 101’; Jenkins, ‘Transmedia 202’). For a narrative to function transmedially, each mode of dispersion should add something new to the narrative, providing unique contributions to ensure multiple points of entry into the narrative world (Jenkins, ‘Transmedia Storytelling 101’). Films, comic books, television shows, video games, radio adaptations, toys, novels and more can all function as modes of dispersion, based on the media being dispersed and the audiences being attracted

(Jenkins, 'Transmedia Storytelling 101'). Each mode of dispersion adds new elements to the narrative and, by default, builds the storyworld. Some of the more successful narratives that have utilised transmedia storytelling have been *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings* and *Star Trek* – with each of the narratives opening up their respective worlds and building a storyworld expansive enough to require multiple modes of dispersion.

These new narratives are not adaptations or retellings of the original narrative, but there are some shades of intertextuality that influence the requirement to place the new narrative in the original's storyworld. Harvey differentiates the two, finding intertextuality to be describing a 'process of remembering', which he finds becomes essential to the transmedia storytelling, 'in which the invocation of ideas, characters, plot points or audiovisual imagery between elements of a franchise are central to that project's success' (34). But more so, for Harvey, the primary distinguishing factor between adaptation and transmedia storytelling is that 'the former relies mainly on temporal displacement, whereas the latter ... focuses much more on spatial expansion of the world in question' (73–74).¹⁶ Ryan states that transmedia storytelling necessitates that a narrative 'hybridize the inherent transmediality of adaptation with the inherent world-expanding capacity of transfictionality'¹⁷ to differentiate between adaptation and transmedia storytelling (529).

In the case of the texts chosen for this thesis, neither adaptation nor transmedia storytelling is strictly followed, but a curious combination of the two is undertaken by the creators. As mentioned above, the quantity of comic books from which to adapt a superhero narrative for film is vast, and the way around that the creators have found is by limiting

¹⁶ As Harvey describes, 'adaptation displaces the former telling of the story, choosing not to recall that the story has 'happened before' and instead presents the same story in a new light, as a new reading with most elements retained, but a few specific ideas expanded upon in the new text (73). Transmedia, on the other hand, remembers the narratives that preceded it, and chooses to expand without 'implicitly or even explicitly' erasing them (Harvey 73).

¹⁷ Transfictionality is Ryan's term when referring to transmedia storytelling, but this thesis will be using the term 'transmedia storytelling' to describe the process as delineated by Jenkins (Ryan 529; Jenkins, 'Transmedia Storytelling 101').

themselves to certain specific iconic signifiers when making the films. With the concept of transmedia storytelling, and the specificity of the study on narratives, multiple modes of conversion are employed to successfully narrativize the films from their source texts. Harvey, in his study of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (or MCU) finds that since the films draw on the source material of the comic books quite heavily, the creators are ‘deploying numerous techniques of adaptation, while at the same time extending the storyworld *intramedially* across various films in the franchise and *transmedially* outward to live action television and comics’ (80–81, my emphasis). Jeffries relates this process to what Richard Saint-Gelais calls transfictionality, defining it as an intertextual relation that ‘neither quotes nor acknowledges its sources. Instead, it uses the source text’s setting and/or inhabitants *as if they existed*’ (612, original emphasis). For Jeffries then, these complementary storyworlds (the comic books and the cinematic universe) and their convergence result in the ‘interactivity built into serialisation as a narrative mode, reward[ing] fans’ “insider” knowledge of the Marvel Comics Universe and encourage[ing] multiple and close viewings of the films themselves’ (288).

This interactivity has become a staple when building both cinematic universes from Marvel Studios and Warner Brothers for their DC Extended Universe (or DCEU). Of the three films analysed for this thesis, two of them are a part of their respective studios’ cinematic universes, namely *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Bird of Prey and the Emancipation of One Harley Quinn* (*Birds of Prey* for short). *Joker*, also a film under analysis, is not a part of the cinematic universe established by DC but instead performs a role similar to that of the comic books *The Dark Knight Returns*, *Batman: The Killing Joke* and *Arkham Asylum*. While these comic books inhabited the universe of DC comics, they functioned as limited series, with few repercussions for the events set in motion in these narratives. Of the three, only *The Killing Joke* has had long-lasting effects on the serial narratives of the characters. *Joker* similarly uses characters present in the Extended Universe but stands alone in order to explore a different

narrative, functioning as an offshoot to the DCEU. While presenting its own narrative, *Joker* still heavily relies on the comic material and the mythos of the Joker as an actant. The film had its own sequel released in 2024, titled *Joker: Folie à Deux*, continuing from events set forth in the first film, thereby launching its own extension to further build the storyworld inhabited by these specific actants.

Of course, such a study of specific narrative elements of a film invites unique challenges, such as limiting the scope of the study. This thesis combines the structuralist elements of narrative analysis with the post-structuralist idea of a mobile signifier, a combination through which potential dilution of either concept is possible. It attempts to provide a holistic view of both concepts and utilise them as required for the purpose of this study. Further, in limiting the scope of the study to the superhero narrative, multiple other films that place evil forces as the subject of the narrative are not considered. Films such as *American Psycho* (2000, dir. Mary Harron), *Split* (2016, dir. M. Night Shyamalan) and others also engage closely with evil in their narratives, a subject that would prove fruitful for any future study. This thesis draws multiple similarities between the Gothic mode and the superhero narrative, utilising the Gothic as a theoretical framework, which may not always apply when analysing the superhero narrative. The Gothic has managed to transgress its original Euro-centric narratives; however the villains of this study follow patterns that were a most prominent feature of the villains found in early Gothic novels, which invites multiple challenges that this thesis does not address, since the thesis has focused on characters and actants more than the socio-historical contexts of either genre.

Meaning of the Supervillain Beyond the Comic Books

Stories of heroes and villains have been a part of human consciousness for about as long as stories themselves. As Ndalianis states, heroic myths consist of ‘universal elements and have a continued presence in cultural memory, yet they’re dynamic beings who shift and

metamorphose to accommodate themselves to specific eras and historic-cultural contexts’ (‘Comic Book Superheroes’ 3–4). The *superhero*, specifically, has a murkier history to trace, since there have always been multiple sources – fictional or not – drawing inspiration for other, newer fictional characters. Jess Nivens’s comprehensive study traces the figure of the superhero back to the oldest written version of a Gilgamesh poem in 2100 BCE, concurrently acknowledging that any definition of the superhero ‘inevitably excludes superheroes who already exist, thereby prov[ing] itself to be useless’ (2). Mythic heroes, the likes of Hercules, Gilgamesh, Paris, Karna, Romulus and others have had scholars define their brand of heroism. Otto Rank’s *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* (1914), Baron Raglan’s response, *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama* (1956) and Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) are all works that define the hero, using myths from Greco-Roman traditions to Norse myths. The mythic hero, however, is only one of the many influences that have contributed to shaping the superhero.¹⁸ Like the superhero, the supervillain has had scholars trace its history back to the days of the Old Testament. In Richard Hall’s *The American Villain: Encyclopaedia of Bad Guys in Comics, Film, and Television*, the book of Genesis is identified as the first that involves a villain, in the form of a snake/reptile/the Devil in disguise (3). And just as the oldest known written story of Gilgamesh might have been the first of the heroic stories, it was also the first that had a villain, the evil deity Enkidu (Hall 6). Just as the Greek myths told stories of Hercules, they told us of the Titans, the Minotaur and the Nemean Lion. Scholars have undertaken studies in tracing the figure of the villain through history, and also of trying to understand exactly what the nature of the villain is that draws in such wide varieties of reinterpretation (Genc and Lenhardt, *Global Perspectives on Villains and Villainy Today*; Zouidi, *Performativity of Villainy and Evil in Anglophone Literature and Media*; Seaber,

¹⁸ Bainbridge even identifies that DC superheroes, specifically the Big Three – Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman – can be understood as a part of the ‘monomyth’ that Joseph Campbell refers to in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Bainbridge 66) (Campbell 3–49).

Villains and Heroes, or Villains As Heroes? Essays on the Relationship Between Villainy and Evil). For Heit, it is a mysterious inherent quality, a deficiency that inhibits the villain's free choice and thereby predisposes them to evil ('Introduction' 8). Forbes is of the belief that the villain – and thereby the evil they represent – is the symbolic risk of 'reflecting on our beliefs' that 'threaten established values but is also necessary for adventure and growth' (19).

Neither scholar is incorrect, but the two are referring to different types of villains, and thereby different types of evil. The villains Heit speaks of have obtained or are working to obtain too much money, power or sex. As a result of this greed, they lose perspective of what has been deemed culturally acceptable and consequently fall into villainy ('Introduction' 8). Forbes is talking more in the context of good and evil in narratives. For Forbes, evil represents 'the danger and instability that threatens our security and our culturally existing values' (19). As a result, narratives that place high importance on evil's role 'invite us to reflect on the ideas and values that we [spectators] take for granted' (Forbes 25–26). Again, it must be reiterated that these are not necessarily universally applicable, nor do Heit or Forbes intend for them to be. Such varied responses to villainy lead to understand the existence of the varieties of villainy. Just as there is no one definition for the superhero, there is no one universal understanding of the supervillain.

There is, however, the myth of the superhero generated by multiple narratives featuring this character, and consequently, there is the myth of the supervillain. As signifiers, these two myths thus are employed in multiple narratives to suit the type of narrative, the genre and the mode through which the narrative is being articulated. The format established by comic writers Siegel and Schuster is one that has come to be associated with the superhero narrative, and variations have explored other modes of articulation over the years. Taking inspiration from the genres that pre-existed the superhero narrative, this new narrative was now able to employ those generic elements to fit into its own. The next section examines one such source of

inspiration, not just for the superhero narrative, but multiple texts spanning the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Villainy in Gothic Literature and Subsequent Appearances

One particular type of villainy is of interest to this study, and it is one that emerged out of a genre that, during its heyday, was extremely popular with just as many critics.¹⁹ Gothic literature, which is said to have emerged out of late-eighteenth-century literature, was for a long time cast out for being ‘popular, low culture, useless, indulgent, fanciful, monstrous and unedifying’ (Botting, *The Gothic* 2). Characterised by the old-fashioned, the barbaric, the pagan and the deliberate portrayal of manifestations of the same, Gothic texts would be easily identifiable with their repeated themes and often stereotypical narratives (Punter, *The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 2, 5). Botting finds that it was in ‘explorations of the mysterious supernatural energies, immense natural forces and deep dark human fears and desires’ that the Gothic found its appeal (*The Gothic* 2). As he further elaborates, Gothic narratives were filled with examples that tested the limits of transgression (Botting, *The Gothic* 2). Narratives would either ‘enable limits and values to be reaffirmed’ or ‘draw eyes and imaginations, in fascination, to peep behind the curtain of limitation in the hope of glimpsing illicit excitements made all the more alluring for bearing the stamp of mystery or prohibition’ (Botting, *The Gothic* 2).

The origins of Gothic texts serve to foreshadow how Gothic comes to be perceived. The first text to outright declare itself as Gothic was Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1765). Though originally published anonymously, a year later Walpole attached his name to the project and added a new subtitle: ‘A Gothic Story’. Scholars continue to debate on the truly

¹⁹ Criticism for the Gothic largely arose out of the social changes that Britain was undergoing at the time, with the Enlightenment movement and a passion for science, empiricism and rational thought entering the public consciousness (Botting, ‘Preface’ 2). Baldick and Mighall note that much criticism arises from ‘a genuine attempt to discriminate between good romances and bad romances’ (268).

Gothic nature of the work, but its outright declaration allowed for multiple other writers to publish their own original narratives with similar themes. Walpole himself was such a fan of the nostalgia that the Gothic demanded²⁰²¹ that when redesigning his home, he added multiple Gothic flourishes to the estate named ‘Strawberry Hill’ (Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto* vii–viii, cited in ‘Introduction: The Gothic in Western Culture’ 15). He would invite visitors to his place, allowing them to enjoy in the space that mimics a time long gone (Round 12). Walpole was a fan of Shakespeare’s works; indeed, multiple Gothic fictions are found to owe debt to Shakespeare, which could further account for how important the revisioning of the past was for Gothic writers (Clery 30).

Walpole was fascinated by this lost period of history, not one based in any reality but an idea of what that period represented. As Punter finds, Walpole is ‘not interested in the specifics of life’ during the Middle Ages – the period in which he bases his story (*The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 46). Instead, he is more interested in creating a general sense of ‘past-ness’, but with the eighteenth-century view of feudalism and aristocracy, what emerges to the forefront of the Gothic is the theme of the sins of the father being revisited by their children (Punter, *The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 46). Walpole was not solely responsible for this popularity, as Botting notes that this nostalgia was part of a wider process of social, political and economic upheaval, what with the Industrial Revolution, the emergence of Enlightenment philosophy and increasingly secular views (‘In Gothic Darkly’ 13–14). During this time of upheaval, it is the upper middle classes who are ‘caught between attractions of terrors of a past’ that was controlled by overachieving figures of authority, like aristocrats, priests and such (Hogle, ‘Introduction’ 3). Elsewhere, Botting writes that such historical

²⁰ As will be examined later in the text, nostalgia played a major role in the formation and building of the superhero’s narratives as well.

²¹ Certain scholars focus on the Gothic as merely being ‘the attractions of terrors of a past’ (Hogle ‘Introduction,’ 3), or the term ‘Gothic’ being employed ‘by analogy with the Gothic Revival in architecture’ (Clery 21). Opinions on its nostalgic value continue to be debated by scholars.

settings allow for two realities to coexist – the past and the present (*Gothic*, 3). As he sees it, such movement between the past and present ‘juxtaposes terrors of the negative with an order authorised by reason and morality’ (*Gothic*, 3).

This sense of nostalgia for a fictional time long gone allowed for narratives to feature multiple symbols of bourgeois nobility and religious institutions. The eighteenth century was a period of commercialisation of such unique commodities, and the cultural value of Gothic relics, like Walpole’s Strawberry Hill, showcases the power of the pound (so to speak) over the past. In narratives as well, the position of power held by those that haunt, the helplessness of those haunted and the suspension of rules leading to narrative tension ensure that the protagonists desire an independence from domestic and social regulation, a freedom which characters find to be ‘pleasurable, dangerous, exciting, and frightening’ (Botting, *Gothic* 5). The power imbalances present in these narratives allowed for scholars to identify Gothic as a marker of social status. For scholars Baldick and Mighall, and Arata, the fear of the Other that Gothic narratives generate through their use of terror indicates that Gothic represents ‘the collective anxieties of the bourgeoisie of this period’ (Arata 280, qtd in Baldick and Mighall 32). Most scholars agree that cultural anxiety is among the main features of the Gothic, what with its focus on marginalised social elements and inversion of social and cultural norms (Round 14). The Gothic serves as a mirror to eighteenth-century values: ‘a reconstruction of the past as the inverted, mirror image of the present, its darkness allows the reason and virtue of the present a brighter reflection’ (Botting, ‘In Gothic Darkly’ 15).

Gothic narratives were mostly set in the past and sensationalist, with their portrayal of extreme situations of terror and its revelling in vice and violence (Punter, *The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 9). Authors belonging to the ‘American Gothic’ tradition²² would feature

²² Though established after Gothic literature in Europe, the popularity of authors like Ann Radcliffe, William Godwin and Walter Scott were a major influence on American writers Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Charles Brockden Brown, initiating the American Gothic tradition (Botting, *Gothic* 113). These three

narratives that dealt with ‘landscapes of the mind, settings distorted by ... the principal characters’ psychological obsessions’ (Punter, *The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 2). Well-known Romantic poets like William Blake and Samuel Coleridge’s works would contain Gothic elements, with Blake’s ‘dehumanised men and women ... machines with a curious and malevolent mode of life’ (Punter, *The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 91) and Coleridge’s use of ‘Gothic exaggeration as a means of conveying the underlying horror of everyday world’ (qtd. in Punter, *The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 91). Above all, Gothic literature was all about terror, shocking its readers with stories of haunted castles, ghosts, vampires, monsters, werewolves (Punter, *The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 1) and, most importantly, of the ‘blackly lowering villain’ (qtd. in Punter, *The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 13).

While the villain played an important role in these texts, this character was not the main source of discord in the protagonists’ lives. As the form developed into a genre of literature, more literary devices and techniques were found to be employed in ensuring an ambivalence and ambiguity in narrative (Botting, *Gothic* 5). Such ambiguity allowed for elements of fantasy and the supernatural to be employed to their fullest, thereby generating feelings of terror and horror (Botting, *Gothic* 5; Punter, *The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 67; Hogle, *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* 2). The two terms are similar enough in the feelings of shock and awe that are generated, but have slight distinctions, particularly in the way terror is often aligned with the *terrific*, and therefore, by extension, the sublime²³ (Punter, *Handbook of Gothic* 243–234). On the contrary, horror brings about feelings of revulsion, disgust and

authors utilised the psychological possibilities of Gothicism (Smith 268), which became a defining feature of American Gothic. Nineteenth-century writers Emily Dickinson, Herman Melville and Henry James utilised the ‘corpse of an evil history working toward fulfilment’ (Savoy 168) to explore and consolidate the ‘underside of the American dream’ (Savoy 167).

²³ The sublime is an idea that was originally ascribed to the natural world – the wonder, awe, joy and horror elicited by mountainous lands were emotions thought to ‘elevate the soul and the imagination with a sense of power and infinity’ (Botting, *Gothic* 38). However, John Dennis’s *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (1704) situated the sublime with supernatural beings, witchcraft, enchantments and the wild creation (Milbank 236). Edmund Burke’s understanding of the sublime is similar, understanding the sublime to be in emotions of awe and terror, and in the sense of potential threat to self (Botting, *Gothic* 39, Milbank 236).

loathing, inducing states of shuddering or paralysis, and so on and so forth. As Botting puts it, terror deals with the mere suggestion of the object, exciting the imagination and concurrently offering a means of escape (*Handbook of Gothic* 185). While horror, on the other hand, has no certain objective, it remains lost in a general blurring of images, leaving the mind in a state of confusion (Botting, *Handbook of Gothic* 185). While terror may present as merely suggestive, with a way out, one escapes sadder and wiser; horror does not deal with the consequences as it works to immobilise, to end (Punter, *Handbook of the Gothic* 244).

It only seems natural that, in a genre that valued the ‘detailed and poeticised depiction of states of mind’, the construction of suspense and shattering the norms of everyday life with wildly shocking and revolting consequences, the villain would emerge as one of the most important characters (Punter, *The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 65, 9; ‘Introduction’ 3). Punter’s description of the Gothic villain owes being quoted in full; as he states,

the villain was always the most complex and interesting character in Gothic fiction ... : awe-inspiring, endlessly resourceful in pursuit of his often opaquely evil ends, and yet possessed of a mysterious attractiveness, he stalks ... manipulating the doom of others while the knowledge of his own eventual fate surrounds him. (*The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 9–10)

Having already created an ethos of horror and terror, writers would use the Gothic villain not simply for embodying terror by being in possession of unnatural physical capabilities like that of extraordinary strength, but for providing a dimension of introspection, for embodying the freezing touch of reality (Punter, *The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 81).

Every iteration of the Gothic story activated elements that were popular in other forms of literature. For example, while Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* was described as providing a sense of nostalgia for an era that did not exist, later works brought about elements of the real world. Anne Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796) were filled with elements of melodrama and terror. The mystery story was introduced in Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1859), and notions of philosophy, religion, science,

politics and poetry were ever present in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). The nineteenth century brought in elements of the subversive and contemporary with Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), while simultaneously treading ground in the newly popular psychoanalytical, with Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) leading the way.

Such easy assimilation of multiplicity into its own led critics to understand the Gothic as more than just a genre of literature. With its ability to perceive 'all manner of aspects of social and psychological life' and by 'binding together many different phenomena', Byron and Punter consider 'Gothic' to simply be a matter of critical convenience, to be deployed as and when required (Byron and Punter, *The Gothic* xix). Botting stresses that such associations are inevitable with 'Gothic' being used 'as a noun and as an adjective, doing and being done to in equal measure' (*Gothic* 19). Jerold Hogle and Andrew Smith agree that much like *Frankenstein's* monster, the Gothic has 'come alive as an important, multi-layered, and profoundly symbolic scheme for dealing with Western culture's most fundamental fears and concerns' (1). This has led Gothic to be understood as a mode, or rather, as Piatti-Farnell and Beville note, 'an agent in its own right in shaping and moulding modern culture and experience' (3).

The three symbols of terror that emerged from this literature form a mould for multiple villains and characters across media, well into the future – the vampire, the wanderer and the seeker of forbidden knowledge were aristocrats in their respective stories, each representing terror-laden response to a specific cultural anxiety. While the wanderer is seen to be read as either a hero or victim based on the story, the vampire emerges as a perverse union of passion and death (Punter, *The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 100, 102). And, while the vampire has existed as a symbol for much longer, his manifestation as a Romantic symbol – a symbol that the vampire becomes best known for – is summarised in John Polidori's 'The Vampyre' (Punter, *The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 103). For Polidori, the victims of the Vampire are

victims of their own internal weakness – they are criminals, gamblers or merely ‘frail’ (Punter, *The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 103). But he is still an anti-bourgeois figure, a master of seduction, a cynic exempt from prevailing socio-moral codes, a rebel not by virtue or turning from society but by having predated it, a participant in a myth produced by the middle class to explain their own antecedents and fears (Punter, *The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 104–105). By the time of Bram Stoker, the vampire becomes a cipher, the ‘vehicle for the desires and agendas of modern critical discourse’ (Baldick and Mighall 281). Much like the Gothic mode itself, the infinite modes of bourgeois anxiety that were generated keep this figure alive, with constant abilities of regeneration (Baldick and Mighall 281).

The seeker of forbidden knowledge, whom Punter connects to Frankenstein, is inevitably seeking the knowledge that is sexual in nature, that of reproducing more of its own kind and thereby ensuring immortality. Alchemists similarly seek the knowledge of eternal life, knowledge that would make men gods (Punter, *The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 105). The error in seeking this knowledge is what Mary Shelley writes of, while also creating a commentary on how a neutral being is made fundamentally evil as a result of circumstances (Punter, *The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 107). Thus, the truly evil act these symbols of terror commit is that of desiring that which is not theirs to take. Punter finds them to be individualist disruptives, discontent with the restrictions placed on them by the settled and ordered society they inhabit (*The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 106).

Stoddart finds *Frankenstein* to have brought about another interesting change in the portrayal of demonic figures. While demonic figures mostly took the shape of Satan in early Gothic writings, similar presences would be felt through ghosts, evil spirits and other similar supernatural beings (Stoddart, ‘The Demonic’ 117). But the release of *Frankenstein*, coinciding with Gothic’s mobilisation of the Faustian myth, found that though Satanic presences would

not blatantly appear as such, Satanic characteristics would be projected onto evil human beings (Stoddart, 'The Demonic' 117). Through this new portrayal of evil, Stoddart observes that

the move away from unmistakably diabolical figures towards portraying evil as a distinctly human potential marks the beginning of an important change in the Gothic towards internalisation, and linked to this, secularisation so that the disturbances caused by the Demonic become more firmly rooted in human agency' ('The Demonic' 117).

Indeed, Frankenstein's monster in *Frankenstein* turns out to be a mere victim of his circumstances; it is the man himself whose ill intentions lead to bad things. Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* also deal with such ideas – with Dorian Gray's painting taking on his sins and Mr Hyde being the body upon which the evil desires of Dr Jekyll are displaced (Stoddart, 'The Demonic' 118).

It should be noted at this point that *Dracula*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* were born out of the second wave of Gothic texts, the highly discussed Victorian era of literature. Over the course of this period of literature, the format of the novel became widespread and easily accessible to readers across England. And the subject matter was highly self-reflexive, with the historical transformations from 1837 to 1901 proving great sources of inspiration for the writers of this time. Victorian texts dealt with multitudinous themes; 'provincial politics, ecclesiastical infighting, city squalor, repressed sexuality, making money, losing money, imperial adventure, angels in the house, frightening New Women, scientific challenges to established religious beliefs, the value and function of the aesthetic life in a materialistic society', all of which were sources of inspiration for the Victorian writers (David 5). These vastly new landscapes for imagination brought in new forms of monstrosity, found in the 'inhumane working conditions disclosed by the social problem fiction of the 1840s' highlighting a deformation of the ideal bourgeois governance, and 'the

manipulation by male villains of female frailty' delineated in the new sensation fiction, showcasing a deformation of decent human behaviour (David 4).

The Gothic was still present during this period, although in a new avatar. This time of upheaval saw the Gothic in degenerationist fantasies and imperial and scientific romances (Pykett, 'Sensation and the Fantastic in the Victorian Novel' 211). The ghost story was among the first few of Gothic relics to make their way into the Victorian era and was quite a prominent feature in works from Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843) into the twentieth century with Elizabeth Bowen's *The Death of the Heart* (1938) and beyond. The Brontë sisters' works were extremely significant in this time for their ability to domesticate Gothic 'by locating their tales of female imprisonment, confinement or persecution (whether physical or psychological) in every day, domestic settings among the middling classes of society' (Pykett, 'Sensation and the Fantastic in the Victorian Novel' 217). This was a common theme among sensation novels, as Henry James notes that these novels were adept at placing the mysteries 'at our doors [...] instead of the terrors of Udolpho, we were treated to the terrors of the cheerful country house, or the London lodgings'. For him, these terrors were 'infinitely more terrible' (594). Dickens also managed to bring the Gothic terror closer to audiences, as *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841) exposes these terrors 'not in the mountain ranges of the Alps or in the isolated castles of central Italy – rather in the stews and hideouts of a London that is portrayed as below the radar ... A place where nobody can find true safety' (Punter, 'Victorian Gothic' 718).

One of the most significant authors of this period was Wilkie Collins, who set the stage for what the sensation novel would become. With *The Woman in White* published in 1860, Collins's work seems to have benefited much from the influences of the Gothic writers as well as the newly emergent form of the sensation novel. *The Woman in White* balances the elements of the Gothic ghost story and the stylised structure of multiple narrators along with the 'narratorial coyness', a gradual uncovering of the mystery, which would come to be associated

primarily with the detective novel (Pykett, *The Nineteenth Century Sensation Novel* 5). For example, in *The Woman in White* Count Fosco is the perfect Gothic villain, what with his foreign origins, mysterious sources of power and the need to escape consequences of his ill deeds (Punter, *The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 196). At the same time, the villain on the domestic front is present as well, as Sir Percival Glyde attempts to ensure he marries the heroine Laura Fairlie and her estate would subsequently become his (Pykett, *The Nineteenth Century Sensation Novel* 32). Collins's novel explores the Victorian anxieties in sexuality, with 'the sexualised frisson of fear produced by the physical touch, sound, and appearance of the mysterious, dreamlike, ghostly (but nevertheless real) woman in Laura Fairlie' – utilising a Gothic effect, inducing terror when introducing a major player in the events of the novel ('Sensation and the Fantastic in the Victorian Novel' 222; Taylor 7).

Collins was particularly masterful at elements of the sensation novel that were not necessarily brand new but would spawn a new genre totally dedicated to itself. As Pykett finds, 'the construction and unravelling of an intricate crossword puzzle plot, the atmospheric scene, the mysterious, prophetic dream, obsessive and disordered mental states, overtly respectable villains, and bold, assertive, and/or devious and scheming heroines and villainesses' were all elements in the sensation novel that Collins would use to his benefit in exploring his narratives (Pykett, *The Nineteenth Century Sensation Novel* 24). Several of these elements are familiar from early Gothic literature but were carried on for readers to discover and uncover the mysteries of 'the duplicitous nature of [their] social reality' (Pykett, 'Sensation and the Fantastic in the Victorian Novel' 221). M.E Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* is among the popular novels of this time, with the author displaying 'narratorial coyness' by 'declining to disclose crucial items of information, or having key events occur off-stage and only revealing their occurrence at the denouement' (Pykett, *The Nineteenth Century Sensation Novel* 5-6). Another famous author handling the mystery while also providing the requisite 'racy' material

of a sensation novel was Ellen Wood, whose influential *East Lynne* (1861) would also employ elements of ‘narrative concealment, a great variety of incident, and extraordinary coincidences’ (Pykett, ‘Sensation and the Fantastic in the Victorian Novel’ 220) to consider the issue of bigamy, yet another issue of prevalence during this time (Pykett, *The Nineteenth Century Sensation Novel* 72–74).

And thus developed the form of the detective novel, mystery stories that found suspicious events leading to the solving of a crime at the hands of a detective, occasionally with a civilian sidekick. Indeed, as Tompkins notes, this new emerging genre of literature owes much to its Gothic predecessor, ‘it is only to [Gothic writers] that the process of suspense and release was an essential fictional mechanism’ (14). Further, Palmer notes how essential the ‘fringe of the knowable’ is to both the Gothic and the detective story, with both modes creating ‘a world where you can never do anything right because the rules are all different – or even worse, are always changing’ (127). While opinions on the first detective novel published vary, it is generally agreed that Edgar Allan Poe’s short story collection *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841) was among the first of such published, the stories themselves being inspired by William Godwin’s *Caleb Williams* (1794) (Priestman 2). *Caleb Williams* is very much a Gothic novel, whose protagonist is haunted by the actions of a murderer; what sets it apart, however, is that it was ‘set in the context of contemporary British power relations’, thereby shifting towards what detective stories would be (Bell 15). The format for crime novels became popular in France and England around the 1860s, its popularity in England particularly owed to *The Newgate Calendar* and other ballads that were inspired by and took material from the *Calendar*.

Newgate novels were inspired by the real-life incidents that were published in the *Calendar*, gained immense popularity in the 1830s and subsequent notoriety in the late 1830s–1840s. These novels chronicled the adventures and escapes of independent, courageous criminals, with settings for the novels ranging from castles to the drinking dens (Pykett, *The*

Nineteenth Century Sensation Novel 19). They managed to romanticise crime, inviting sympathy for the criminals rather than for the victims by making the criminals the haunted objects of a chase, focusing on their motivation or psychology and representing them as victims of circumstance or society (Pykett, *The Nineteenth Century Sensation Novel* 20). By the 1860s, the sensation novel took over England, with cheap newspapers, expanding of the penny press and more crimes to report, all of which provided a viable market (Pykett, *The Nineteenth Century Sensation Novel* 32). What distinguished these novels, as mentioned above, was that they explored the dark underbelly of a respectable society rather than the criminal underworld and shifted focus from the crime itself to the detection of the criminal (Pykett, *The Nineteenth Century Sensation Novel* 35). Most stories were serialised at this point, published in magazines – it was a format that suited the short stories of the time, and authors like Charles Dickens and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle took advantage (Kayman 41).

The figure of the hero-villain had already been a part of multiple Gothic texts, but this figure gained more popularity during the Victorian era. Linked to Satan as depicted in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* or the Ancient Mariner as penned by Samuel Coleridge, this hero-villain is a mixture of contradictory traits, displaying unpredictable behaviour and violent urges (Stoddart, 'Hero-Villain' 177). By the eighteenth century, this character becomes a 'man of feeling', set in a romantic setting with an ability to 'love and hate, equally under cover' (Brontë 8). These characters 'are portrayed from within', as they 'demand empathy with the agonised villain who is now a warped hero' (McEvoy 24). By the nineteenth century, and with the advent of Newgate novels, these warped heroes were the main source of curiosity for Victorian penny serials (Poore 2–3). As Mayer finds in the morally fallible hero, 'plays in which the "good" and "bad" characteristics of the hero contend' became essential to melodrama productions of the time (150). This warped hero, who later comes to be known as the anti-hero, thus becomes the connecting thread between melodrama and the Gothic mode. While this thesis does not

focus primarily on melodrama or the anti-hero, traits of the two surface often in superhero narratives.

Alyce von Rothkirch's comprehensive typology of the villains in detective stories aids this study in understanding the types of villains utilised by these stories. Their study categorises the villains as the degenerate and atavistic 'born' criminals, the foreign villain, the habitual and professional criminals and finally the occasional opportunistic criminals (Rothkirch). Stephen Knight briefly discusses the master criminal as a type of villain found in novels like *The Woman in White* and *East Lynne*. For him, the master criminal is the sort of device used to bring simplicity to plot and 'sympathy to everybody else' (59). Knight identifies Professor Moriarty of Sherlock Holmes fame, authored by Doyle, to embody this master criminal in his own tales, introduced as a way to simplify his plots (59). Knight here is clearly tracing this figure back to the Gothic tradition, attributing the mystery solving of the two sensation novels produced at the same time to have had the same effect as Moriarty. While it is true that Doyle's works and *The Woman in White* and *East Lynne* follow a sense of mystery to be solved through a consciously constructed narrative, *The Woman in White* is very much a Gothic novel in terms of its villains, as discussed above, and *East Lynne* is much more focused on character errors. Moriarty was introduced as a solution to a problem, not so much a part of the narrative the way Carlyle was a part of *East Lynne* or Glyde was a part of *The Woman in White*.

The problem for Doyle was weariness and tedium with crafting the perfect and challenging mystery, one of Holmes's calibre (Fowles 7). Unable to do so at that time, he introduced Moriarty to put an end to his second series of stories published as *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (1894). Multiple elements in the previous stories were tied to Moriarty, making him the connecting thread tying together multiple storylines. Moriarty was created as 'a Svengali of evil' who rarely committed the crimes himself (Kohns 2). Doyle has Holmes admit that Moriarty is 'a genius, a philosopher, an abstract thinker ... has a brain of the first

order' with 'tendencies of the most diabolical kind' (Doyle 243). Furthermore, Holmes admits that Moriarty is 'an antagonist who [is] my intellectual equal' (Doyle 243). Doyle is convincing enough when describing Moriarty as 'a spider in the centre of its web, but that web has a thousand radiations, and he knows well every quiver of each of them' (Doyle 243). A common comparison Doyle would use when describing Moriarty was to Napoleon, the French emperor whose impact on European society was as traumatising as it was long-lasting. Bradway notes how even before the nineteenth century, during Napoleon's time, several insinuations were made of the similarities between Napoleon and Satan (28). One example finds political cartoonists applying the 'image of the Beast when depicting the French general' (28). Doyle was fascinated with the figure of Napoleon, and instead of using the term itself, Doyle made the Devil Sherlock Holmes's greatest villain (Bradway 31).

While Moriarty has also been read as an atavistic criminal (Kohns), his status as a master criminal seems to carry more strength in terms of the impact this form of criminality had on the detective novels. Poore even finds traces of the original Gothic villains in Moriarty, with his unexpected nimble strength along with a false identity (since he has given up a professorship but still uses the title) (Poore 24). To be sure, Moriarty and his status as the master criminal is one that has been replicated multiple times in all forms of media, even the comics, with his ability to be a signifier of his own (Poore 24).²⁴ However, Palmer's reading of evil in the thriller bears consideration at this point, especially keeping in mind the Gothic roots that this thesis aims to trace. For Palmer, evil is not something to be explained away, 'evil is the product of malevolence ... if you reduce it to the determination of the environment, or to cultural and political discord, or to whatever, it ceases to be evil, and becomes conflict or crime. Evil is what is left over when science has explained everything it can' (Palmer 101). In

²⁴ Poore refers to the fusion between the realistic and the fantastic in Moriarty's abilities as described by Doyle (24). This 'slippage between categories', Poore notes, is revealed in 'even the original of this most ubiquitous type of neo-Victorian villain' who 'refuses to remain in a single category' (24). In this refusal to remain in a single category, and in the character's multiple reincarnations, Moriarty becomes a mobile signifier.

comparisons to Napoleon, and by extension the Devil himself, Doyle left no doubt in readers' minds that Moriarty would be the final problem, indeed. However, Doyle would go on to create another villain for Holmes in the Hound, from *The Hound of Baskervilles* (1902), which proves to be as much, or perhaps more of a threat to Holmes. John Fowles finds that 'the Hound is the primeval force behind Moriarty: not just one form that evil takes, but the very soul of the thing' (11). Palmer agrees, stating that the Hound 'produces the shudder that it does because it is an infernal apparition, belief in which is helped by the old legend of the Satanic hound' (128).

The Satanic – or its characteristic traits, at the very least – then becomes an essential element in defining such long-lasting villainy. One of the more long-lasting single characters with such defining traits, to successfully be in the public consciousness till the success of superhero comics and even spread to other forms of media, was Fu Manchu. Created under the pen-name Sax Rohmer by Arthur Henry Ward in 1912, Fu Manchu was serialised in *The Story Teller* in the UK, and *Collier's* in America, the latter of which would go on to publish multiple sequels for years to come. Rohmer was clearly influenced by Doyle's success with Sherlock Holmes and used many elements from those stories (Mayer 9, 29, 37, 38). The narratives feature one Sir Denis Nayland Smith and one Dr Petrie, who work together to understand the spread of crime that trails back to the villain, Fu Manchu. The similarities were also noted by Bloom, who finds the Fu Manchu narrative to 'border on a pastiche of Conan Doyle' (*Cult Fiction* 182). However, as mentioned above, Moriarty was merely introduced as a solution to a problem. Fu Manchu, on the other hand takes prominent significance early in the narratives (even though he is not physically present at first), and he even manages to gain the upper hand over Nayland Smith, in terms of public attention and in the narrative world as well (Mayer 29).

Like his Victorian and Gothic ancestors, Fu Manchu is very much a result of the specific cultural anxiety surrounding the 'yellow peril' that was first established in Europe, and later

moved to America in the 1900s, where such references to a ‘yellow spectre’ were effervescent (Mayer 21). The anxiety of this ‘yellow peril’ taking over the Western parts of the world was the main terror symbolised through Fu Manchu, which succeeded by reiterating a myth drawn on a ‘repertoire of images and motifs that insists on timelessness while being subject to constant change and frequent updates or reboots’ (Mayer 21). Fu Manchu is described as having ‘the brains of any three men of genius ... a mental giant’, with ‘a face like Satan ... the most uncanny eyes that ever reflected a human soul’ and, most interestingly, in possession of unexplained but unearthly ‘powers’ (Rohmer 35, 25–26, 66). Majority of the Fu Manchu novels’ focus remains on himself, not so much on the ‘heroes’ of the narratives, who Kohns finds ‘pale’ in comparison. This villain was a doctor determined to rule the world through his secret organisation Si-Fan, representing the threat of oriental invasion characteristic of the early twentieth century (Mayer 4).

Mayer notes how the serialised format of the novels aided in the cultural fear, what with terms like ‘sprawl, growth, dispersion, and excrescence’ used to describe the serial mode (7). Further, the seemingly instant popularity granted to the figure only aided in stressing on the omnipresence and evanescence of the figure, ‘suggesting a phenomenon in constant flux and yet unchanging’ (Mayer 5). Fu Manchu indeed could not have been described better, as only ten years after being published in America, a fifteen-chapter serial titled *The Mystery of Fu Manchu* brought the figure into more public spheres. Ten years after this, Fu Manchu would be portrayed by Boris Karloff in *The Mask on Fu Manchu* (1932), which would go on to make an icon out of the villain, pushing him further into the public eye, so comic writer Jack Kirby (creator of Captain America and many more) would eventually create a comic series for Marvel Comics featuring Fu Manchu as *The Yellow Claw* (1956).

When discussing James Bond’s various villains, Stephen Gerrard notes at the outset that ‘Sherlock Holmes had Moriarty. Potter had Voldemort. Bond has Blofeld’, clearly setting

him apart from the other villains whom Bond encounters on his adventures (175). Umberto Eco notes in his essay that Blofeld remains a ‘master of planning, an organising genius, as treacherous as needs be, and sexually impotent’ (153). Blofeld’s villainy extends to his ‘almost mimosaic [*sic*] sensibility in matters of security’, leading to the creation of two secret organisations over the course of his oeuvre – TARTAR and SPECTRE (Fleming 63, qtd. in Gerrard 174). Gerrard studies each iteration of Blofeld’s filmic appearances, but an interesting point he notes, which will be useful for this study, is that Blofeld has consistently appeared to be created as a mirror image of Bond. And for all of Bond’s clarity and clear visibility to audiences, multiple appearances of Blofeld’s have begun with him hidden in the shadows. Gerrard notes that in his earliest iterations, ‘Blofeld was seen as this omnipresent, overarching and foreboding presence’ (177), echoing Fu Manchu and Moriarty’s implied presence in the course of the narratives in which they take up the narrative focus.

These examples allow for the discussion of certain characteristic traits that would define the arch-villain, or the supervillain. Going back to the source of inspiration, evil in its purest form, conceptualised from the Satanic, has carried on by taking different shapes and figures, responding to the cultural anxieties faced by the period of its activation. The terror in Gothic novels, explored through troubled mind-states and an external villain, led to an imprinting of those Satanic characteristics onto these villains. The Satanic element in these villains is pronounced as they are depicted as representatives of important institutions: for example the monk Ambrosio in *The Monk* or the greedy Italian nobleman Montoni in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, both of whom are tempted by the Devil – quite literally in Ambrosio’s case. By the time of the Victorian age, the Devil is now in man himself, or rather man’s other half. *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Frankenstein* all have doubles of the protagonist scarred by the evil that they have wrought on themselves. And finally, after the wave of sensational novels and the delight of solving a mystery like the newly formed Detective Police,

the Satanic is externalised again, but this villain is the Devil incarnate. Moriarty, the Hound, Fu Manchu, are all Devils in their own right, and their only mission is to spread their malevolent evil across the Western world.²⁵

It becomes evident, then, that the figure this thesis traces is the Satanic, located in the figure of the supervillain.²⁶ As explored above, it is evident that the Satanic functions as the mobile signifier, activated time and again, and outfitted to suit the specific cultural anxiety being addressed in that specific text. Yet the gendered implications of the term ‘mobile signifier’ alongside large presence of monstrous women in the Gothic mode has not yet been examined – a task this thesis undertakes, since one of the main texts of analysis follows a female supervillain. As defined in the section above, the mobile signifier indicates the ability for multiple meanings to be ascribed to a single actant, and with each activation of the actant new meanings are thereby generated. It is based on the Lacanian notion of meaning-making with reference to the Oedipal castration complex, in which the (boy) child struggles to define himself in relation to his mother, under threat of castration from the father. Thus, meaning generated by the mobile signifier is in relation to the law of the father, which comprises the symbolic order, or the rules of society at large. The gendered implications of such a formulation become essential in its overlooking of the second sex, in which the mother is the Other. This method of Othering then is the main focus of analysis among feminist scholars, and naturally also a source of interest among Gothic scholars. The two fields converge in *Art of Darkness*

²⁵ Of course, in the case of the Hound, the evil is not the dog itself, the symbolism of the dog is much more significant. Fowles argues for the Hound being ‘an enemy far more profound and horrifying than any mere human criminal’ because of its lack of context (11). The dog does not have evil intentions, but the dog has no intentions at all; ‘the Hound is the primeval force behind Moriarty: not just one form that evil takes, but the very soul of the thing’ (Fowles 11).

²⁶ The Satanic, as understood by the Gothic mode, functions as an archetype and must not be misunderstood with John Milton’s Satan as appears in *Paradise Lost* (1667). Milton’s Satan could arguably be read as a precursor to the Byronic hero, regarded as a ‘hero because of [his] resistance to over-powering tyranny’ (Botting *Gothic*, 84). The Satanic refers to villains of pure evil, one who ‘mocks at society, who remains unassimilable’ (Punter, *The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 47).

(1995), where Anne Williams identifies that “the female” and “the Gothic” have a pronounced affinity ... since “the female” is the most powerful and persistent “other” of Western culture’ (19).

As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has noted, ‘certain features of the Oedipal are consistently foregrounded’ in Gothic narratives, and psychoanalytical ‘tool[s] for explicating’ Gothic narratives are a given (91). Williams’s study takes that notion further, by stating that the ‘Law of the Father’ is present in multiple Gothic narratives as the ‘tyrannical *paterfamilias*’, and thus its basic structure of reality is that of the patriarchal ‘Law of the Father’ (24, 41). The scholarly discussion of a ‘Female Gothic’ coincided with the second wave of feminist awakening, with Ellen Moers’s *Literary Women* identifying the women writers and their impact on Gothic literature, defining a ‘Female Gothic’ as that belonging to ‘the work that women writers have done’, and stating that Ann Radcliffe ‘firmly set the Gothic in one of the ways it would go ever after: a novel in which the central figure is a young woman who is simultaneously persecuted victim and courageous heroine’ (90, 91). Since then, multiple scholars have taken up various definitions to indicate Female Gothic, with each interpretation based in various modes of analysing the Gothic. Historicist and psychoanalytic modes to trace the source and find the true meaning of ‘Female Gothic’ have sprung ever since, with scholars like Diane Wallace and colleagues (2009), Susanna Becker (1999) and Adriana Craciun (2003) offering perspectives of each.

The Female Gothic plot is characterised, according to Williams, by its chosen point of view through which the suspense is generated, as the reader would ‘share both the heroine’s often mistaken perceptions and her ignorance’ (102). Further, while the Male Gothic plot may deal with a tragic plot, wherein the hero/villain is punished for overreaching the law, the Female Gothic plot is ‘affirmative’: ‘the heroine experiences a rebirth’ (Williams 103). For Williams

then, the Female Gothic plot presents an alternative to the Oedipal crisis ‘in the formation of the speaking subject’, who is now portrayed with ‘different desires, who sees the world with a different eye/I’ (139).²⁷ And so with this new perspective, new gaze, ‘duality or multiplicity replaces “unity” or “oneness” as the assumed (and privileged) condition of the other’ (Williams 149, original emphasis).

In the next section, a brief history of comic books and their respective adaptations into films is explored, especially that of superhero comics adapted into film. This examination works to establish the background against which contemporary superhero films, like those considered for the main analysis of this thesis, have achieved the critical acclaim and monetary box-office success that they have, something that has not always applied to the superhero narrative. The narrative has very consciously appropriated content and ideology from multiple pre-existent texts, while still maintaining its faithfulness to its own original narrative, and most importantly to the maintenance of the status quo. This has come to mean that superheroes and supervillains are iconised by themselves, and by relation their inspired texts. The next section elaborates and explores what it means to be a superhero and supervillain.

Historical Context of Comic Books, Heroism and Villainy

Just as the previous section traced the Satanic as being the mobile signifier that has brought to superhero narratives the prototype of the supervillain, this section also traces a specific history. The transition from Gothic literature to comic book narratives, while quite distant from some perspectives, has proven to be extremely valuable to this study. The present section traces the history of comic books themselves, in an effort to understand the cultural forces that led to the superhero narrative. It becomes evident that, just as with the supervillain,

²⁷ Rather than relying on the Oedipal crisis as the main signifier of gendered relations in the context of the Female Gothic plot, Williams uses the myth of Psyche and Eros, in which Psyche accomplishes four tasks set to her by Greek goddess Aphrodite (mother love) to gain back the affection she had with Eros (son of Aphrodite). With the help of the natural world, Psyche is able to accomplish the four tasks and transcend the mortal realm to become a goddess, and give birth to their child, Pleasure.

the superhero narrative itself owes its emergence to the success and popularity of other genres, such as science fiction, adventure narratives and horror. As this section elaborates, Gothic terror played a major role in the birth of the superhero narrative as well.

Comic books, since their inception, have had a unique narrative strategy. The true inception and detailed history of comics and the comic form is beyond the scope of this study, as multiple scholars have looked at and successfully recorded the history of the comic form (Vanderbeke 35-40; Goggin and Hassler-Forest *The Rise and Reason of Comics and Graphic Literature: Critical Essays on the Form*) and its development over the years (Gardner *Projections*; Jones *Men of Tomorrow*), and they have analysed specific characters (Gordon *Superman*; Pearson and Uricchio *The Many Lives of Batman*). The focused history that this study explores provides important cultural context for the ideas of the public appeal, of comic adaptations and of mobile signifiers. While some scholars may believe that comics could have possibly originated in cave paintings,²⁸ it is generally acknowledged that comics in their culminating format became popular by the late nineteenth century. This history lays out the general debates surrounding the development of comics with the format of film, the relationship shared between the two, and particularly that of the superhero comics.

The first published comic work dates back to 1895 with Richard Outcault's *The Yellow Kid*, though a strong argument could also be made for Gilbert Dalziel's *Ally Sloper's Half Holiday* in 1884. Before that, William Hogarth played an influential role in developing the method of sequential narratives around the eighteenth century.²⁹ Through the years, the format of a narrative formed through sequential art evolved and developed into the comics as they are known today. And through the decades, they have maintained the narrative structure that is rooted in valuing shocks, fragments and discontinuities, a commonality it shares with the

²⁸ In fact, Vanderbeke finds even cave drawings to display sequential imagery that is one of the defining traits of the comic art (37).

²⁹ Hogarth and G. E. Lessing would pioneer the idea of temporality in a static image – implying movement between images in a series that leads to ideas of sequentiality and narrative in comic images (Domsch 18–19).

Gothic (Gardner 5). As the form developed, artists and creators were able to experiment with the comic form, with influences taken from film, real-life events and the creators' own personal journeys. Kunzle finds that the truly *comic* strip had not emerged until the late eighteenth century in England, with pictorial propaganda and social cartoons created in comic styles (3).

One particularly influential stage is from the Modern era, when film had just emerged as a serious discipline and comics were increasingly coming to be defined as 'primitive and childish' (Gardner 5). Comic creators found a freedom in not being taken seriously, as they now had the ability to comment on the social and economic changes of the time, with new structures and technologies abounding, and still be considered funny (Gardner 10). Richard Outcault's *Hogan's Alley* featured the Yellow Kid, an orphan whose daily battles in the slums of New York were showcased as comic strips and published in the newspapers. Gardner finds that the American comics of this time were particularly fascinated 'in the repeated interaction of fixed and predictable types' (7). These comics gave birth to the 'serialised responses to repeated structures – narrative, environmental, social – responses that, over time ... accord to the stereotype [of] an identity (and a trademark)' (Gardner 13). These narratives featured '[t]he amorality and randomness of modern city life', taken to be a joke and yet played to a grim effect (Gardner 8). Criminals, tramps and tricksters revel in these early comics and are always the source of the joke (Gardner 8,9).

Most of the prominent comic strips of the time, like those mentioned earlier, were 'gag-a-day' strips. Over time, continuity strips found a place in the newspapers, with strips like *Popeye* (1929), *Little Orphan Annie* (1924) and *Dick Tracy* (1931) finding immense popularity among audiences. Comics of this time carried the dominant narrative of a farce mixed with physical comedy, a combination that often took the form of slapstick violence (Chapman 26, qtd. in Vanderbeke 50). The narratives were also frozen in time, so years could go by and Little Annie would remain the same age. There were other comics that developed in real or semi-real

time as well, such as *Gasoline Alley* (1918) and *Doonesbury* (1970). The first comic books published during this time primarily featured reprints of the newspaper strips that audiences were familiar with. With the books proving quite successful among all members of the public, publishers started selling ‘comical’ comics just for children, which could be bought with the allowance their parents gave them (Vanderbeke 54; Jones 73).

By the 1920s, characters were moving between various media, with strips being produced about slapstick comedy actors. The 1930s saw *Buck Rogers* (1928), *The Shadow* (1930) and *The Green Hornet* (1936), which were originally major hits on the radio, gaining comic books of their own – already setting the stage for comics’ hybrid capabilities (Collins 165). It was around this time that genres like science fiction, crime fiction, horror, war fiction, romance and the Westerns had become extremely popular on screens, and so naturally comics were published in each of those genres.³⁰ While early comics were more of the satirical variety, these popular comics of the twentieth century were different, developing out of the anxieties that the Depression brought (Chambliss and Svitavsky 6). Christiansen finds that a ‘cinematographic language’³¹ in comics emerged out of the necessity to stay true to the genre of the story being told (111). Since films ventured into adventure stories and science fiction stories in the years from 1907 to 1912, the comics therefore needed to do justice to those genres, implementing material from these new and popular genres and creating similarly complicated narrative techniques (Christiansen 111–112).

The most influential of these new comics was *The Shadow*, voiced by a mysterious narrator on the radio and written for comics by Walter B. Gibson. He used his knowledge of

³⁰ Julia Round (*Gothic in Comics and Graphic Novels*) discussed in detail the horror comics and their relationship with Gothic.

³¹ Christiansen here refers to scholars like John Fell, David Kunzle and Francis Lacassin to discuss cinematographic language, referring to a ‘deep structure of the visual language beyond style’ (108). This deep structure in turn refers to techniques of storytelling based on a ‘universal human experience, relatively independent of style’ (110). Christiansen acknowledges that this is a grey area with not a lot of evidence, but this thesis takes such parallels as a matter of course, what with the two forms developing at the same time and Gardner’s own acknowledgement that comics provided films with a ‘model, the theory, and material’ to turn scripts into moving images (2, 23).

designing puzzles, mixed it with ‘theatrical flamboyance, Victorian excess and the shock of the unbelievable’ to design the Shadow and his stories – using not just Gothic tropes but also incorporating the Gothic setting of bourgeois extravagance and doubling (Jones 74). The Shadow is a mysterious man who masquerades as a playboy while secretly commanding a network of operatives, fighting the most brutal of gangsters with guns – a precursor to the Batman/Bruce Wayne dynamic. When comic book publishers Street and Smith found audiences asking for ‘that Shadow magazine’, having already sold multiple crime fighting pulp magazines, they could quickly pull together a few pages of comic to create *The Shadow*, now a magazine (Jones 74). They were able to do a few interesting things now – create a crime fighter with superhuman abilities and possessing a distinct appearance – and supposedly developed an ‘in-house word of this type of character: the superhero’ (Jones 74).

The heroes of the 1930s were ‘hard-boiled loners possessed of a modern cynicism that questioned the fairness found in urban life’ (Chambliss and Svitavsky 8). There were always exceptions to the rule though, and *The Skylark of Space* seemed to be one of them. Featured first in August 1928, this issue of *Amazing Stories* featured a flying man in a skin-tight costume, smiling – a marked contrast to other covers that were generally filled with images of dread (Jones 29–30). This optimism was not the trend, as the hard-boiled detective stories were much more popular and sold more magazines, now called ‘pulp’. But the idea was planted in Superman creator Jerry Siegel’s and other artists’ minds, an idea that would catch on in America in a few years.

The fact that the superhero genre was built by reusing tropes and reworking stories from other genres is a major trait of the superhero comics and films that followed and, as mentioned above, has been done before with the Gothic as well. Henry Jenkins’s essay goes into detail of this unique ability that superhero comics have possessed from the start, where ‘writers interested in telling stories set in other genres ... operate within the almighty superhero genre’

(‘Just Men in Tights’ 18). Such retellings help to reconfigure the ‘already-said’, moving across genres and forms of discourse, thereby altering their traditional mode of circulation (Collins 165). Just as Gothic was able to constantly resituate itself, from nostalgic and sensational to contemporary and subversive, the superhero narrative has proved to be flexible enough to absorb multiple genres and tropes into its own (Round 13; Jenkins, ‘Just Men in Tights’ 27).

The Shadow may or may not have been the first superhero, but he set up the character archetype for what the superhero could become. Jones reports that Jerry Siegel was highly influenced by the films and comics he read while creating his own. Douglas Fairbanks performing in Fred Niblo’s *The Mark of Zorro* (1920), Edgar Rice Burrough’s *Tarzan of the Apes* (1912),³² Edward Elmer Smith’s *The Skylark of Space* (1928) and various stories out of *Amazing Stories*, *Weird Tales* and *Science Wonder Stories* were all inventions of the 1920s. They featured tales of futuristic societies, travels to space and everyday men finding devices that open their world views up to space and beyond (Jones 29–33). These stories, in turn, find roots in Victorian and late-Gothic fiction, with novels like Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* (1895) and other similar chronicles that inspired a genre of science fiction stories gaining popularity in American pulps and magazines around the 1920s (Jones 31).

Much scholarship on this period of comic book publication does not focus a lot on the supervillains; it focuses on just the superheroes. However, there are impressions of villains who were inevitably defeated by the superheroes. For example, when discussing the superheroes, scholars note that these heroes fought a mixed variety of urban thugs who killed innocent men, Asian masterminds and bad guys who threatened traditional American values (Jones 74) (Chambliss and Svitavsky 16). Early comics had their villains as well: for example, C. W.

³² A relic narratively set during the Victorian era, serving as inspiration for the prototype narrative that would come to be associated with superheroes.

Kahles's strip *Our Hero's Hairbreadth Escapes* later renamed *Hairbreadth Harry* (1906–1939). The villain Relentless Rudolph was inspired Harry Hershfield's *Desperate Desmond* (1910–1912), and upon cancellation Desmond would appear in *Dauntless Durham of the U.S.A* (1913–1914), subsequently replacing the pre-existing villain of the strip, Lord Havaglass. Barefoot notes how these villains had undertones of the Victorian melodramatic villain, one who 'wore his villainy plain on his face ... [with his] swarthy dark complexion', identifying the similarities not just in style but also in content that was shared between Gothic and the superhero text (99; Jones 96–98).

Superheroes became the focal point for a significant amount of the new comic material once Superman's launch was met with success. Very quickly, Superman was being licensed for merchandise, had his own radio show and an animated television show. Each adaptation and advertisement for these licensed products added to the mythos of Superman, with some of the most long-standing parts of his mythos coming from the writers of the radio show *The Adventures of Superman*, which aired from 1940 to 1951 (Harmon 197). Other comic writers and artists were consecutively working together and creating as many stories and characters as they could, one of which was the Batman. Publishing houses like Timely Comics (which would later become Marvel Comics) capitalised on the interest in superheroes and created their own superheroes, with The Human Torch and Sub-Mariner leading the way (Gardner 108). The 1940s saw many more superheroes coming out of the fray with considerable popularity (Morton 42). At the onset of the World War, along with fighting fictional bad guys, superheroes were used as symbols of promoting patriotism, and their stories would cast superheroes fighting real-world antagonists and encouraging their readers towards buying war bonds. Captain America punched Hitler, an act that becomes a major defining trait of his mythos. Superman was consistently used to carry Public Service Announcements (PSAs), establishing him as a supporter of national causes and a figure with concern for children (Gordon 156). With

animated shows featuring similar versions of these characters and televisions in every American home, superheroes and supervillains were becoming household names.

With the widespread popularity of comic books, and superheroes specifically set in the modern era, the sources of inspiration are shown to have predated the times they were created in. For example, Bainbridge's study finds multiple pre-modern influences in the superheroes from DC, with Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman resembling 'a condensation of heroic archetypes' as laid forth by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (66). The narratives of these characters, their costume design and the way their justice is 'transcendent' in place of upholding the court of law each mimic the premodern ideal as 'divine figures of retribution' (67). Furthermore, in Marvel's characters Bainbridge finds clear depictions of melodrama narratives. In *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Peter Brooks delineates the elements of melodrama as including 'moral polarities and schemes, extreme situations of being, situations, actions and emotions, inflated and extravagant expression, overt villainy that manifests itself in dark plots, suspense, persecution of the good (by the villain), and the final reward of virtue' (Brooks 16–20 qtd in. Bainbridge 68).³³ Each of these elements appears in the Marvel Comics canon, whether it is Peter Parker learning of his powers, the Hulk coming to terms with his monstrosity, Thanos's villainous plots and the extreme situations in which the superheroes find themselves. Each of these various influences on the superhero narrative played a major role in their popularity – first in comic book format and eventually on film.

Long-Standing Popularity of Comic Book Films

Comic book films were designed (e)specially for children and formatted as serials (Dixon and Graham 1). These strip-to-screen adaptations were played at movie theatre

³³ Since Brooks' study, scholars have continued to expand the definitions of what constitutes melodrama, particularly with respect to Film studies. Gledhill and Williams note Brooks' limited scope in his study of melodrama, citing the 'practices of production and circulation' as equally essential in understanding melodrama's impact on popular mass media (2). Mercer and Shingler state that within film studies, 'melodrama was never a single cinematic form but rather a hybrid of various sub-genres and film cycles' (16-17).

matinees on successive Saturday mornings (Dixon and Graham 1). It is interesting to note that some films looked to comics for inspiration at this time. For Gardner, filmmakers turning to comic strips for the developing form of film comes as a matter of course (19). Indeed, the *Happy Hooligan* films of the 1900s produced by Edison and Biograph had become successful enough to warrant a franchise of their own, one that lasted until 1903 (Gardner 19). Owing to the fact that ‘novelistic’ narratives were not a priority in either comics or films of the time, Gardner finds that Hooligan’s ‘ability to remain recognisable in the midst of pleasurable shocks’ made up for the films’ lack of narrative coherence (19). Indeed, he further notes that the traditional beginnings and endings we expect from film narrative did not seem essential to the early filmmaker, to the adapted serial comics or to the audiences that kept going to theatres to watch these films (Gardner 20). Gardner goes as far as to identify Edwin S. Porter, producer and cinematographer of multiple silent films, as ‘the visionary who pointed film out of the hieroglyphic language of the first decade toward its twentieth-century destiny’ (21). The early twentieth century saw animated cartoons from comic artists developed into film, with French cartoonist Emile Cohl’s *Fantasmagorie* (1908) being one of the first animated films (Gardner 6). Winsor McCay’s *Little Nemo* (1911) and Bud Fisher’s *Mutt and Jeff* (1911) were both animated features based on comics of the same name.

The year 1918 saw Scott Sidney’s live-action adaptation of the Tarzan magazine serials and novels, titled *Tarzan of the Apes*. The comic strip for Tarzan would not emerge until 1929. As animation techniques improved, studios dedicated to creating animated shows emerged, one of the most important of which was Fleisher Studios. The production house became the primary place for animated shorts, films and even two-reel Technicolour extravaganzas for *Popeye the Sailor with Betty Boop* (1933). Although Fleisher Studios went into debt by 1941, they were bought out by Paramount Studios, going on to create the first animated show for Superman. Oft-quoted lines that defined Superman for many years to come – such as ‘It’s a bird! It’s a

plane! It's Superman!' and '... fights for truth, justice, and the American Way!' – were written for the radio show and used for the television show, with the accompanying visuals setting in stone their intrinsic place in his story, while also utilising the hybrid nature of comic books, the superhero narrative and Superman himself.

Multiple live-action adaptations were produced and released with success around this time as well. Comics like *Blondie*, *The Phantom*, *Hop Harrigan*, *Dick Tracy*, *Flash Gordon* and *Buck Rogers* found themselves in serials and on comic pages. By late 1940s, Superman, Batman and Captain America had live-action serials of their own, one of the more prolific ones being George Reeves's iconic *The Adventures of Superman* (1951). For a long time, George Reeves was the quintessential Superman, and future Superman films would refer back to this serial, invoking the nostalgia that Superman comes to represent among American audiences (Gordon's chapter 'Superman: The Object of Nostalgia' discusses this in detail).³⁴ The serials were not limited to superheroes; other comic book characters also had serials and even full-length feature films of their own being released by the mid-1950s. Alternative comics also found a market for adaptations of their material by the late 1960s, with *Barbarella* released in 1968 and a parodic version of Flash Gordon, titled *Flesh Gordon*, releasing in 1974.

At this juncture, it becomes essential to remember that Hollywood was, like any industry in the arts, going through its own growing pains. Hollywood no longer wanted a cinema of attractions by the 1920s, following its own narrative technique, choosing a 'persistence of vision, developing narrative conventions and technical practices that matched the suturing effects of the illusion of movement generated on the screen' (Gardner 5). Early cinema was renowned for placing the story at the lowest priority while making a film, as

³⁴ As discussed earlier, the nostalgia of a long-lost past is one of the key traits of the Gothic mode which, in different narratives, displays either a yearning for that past (such as in Walpole's *Otranto*) or the manifestation of sins from the past returning to haunt those in the present (such as in Collins's *The Woman in White*). Similarly, the superhero narrative provides a similar comfort as they 'hark back to simpler times and get consumed as comfort food', while also reworking and reinventing the genre, with works like Morrisons's *Animal Man*, Moore's *Watchmen* and more ('Captain America Sheds His Mighty Tears' 79).

prominent filmmaker Georges Méliès himself says ‘... I merely use it as a pretext for the “stage effects”, the “tricks”, or for a nicely arranged tableau’ (qtd. in Gunning 161). This is not to say that narrative cinema did not exist in early cinema. Gunning finds that fictional scenes were mostly found as ‘gags, vaudeville numbers or recreations of shocking or curious incidents’ (Gunning 163). By 1913, feature films appeared and revised the format of these films, essentially concentrating on narratives for film. Now, rather than relying on tricks to enamour audiences, films stuck to ‘elements of dramatic expression, entries into the psychology of character and the world of fiction’ (Gunning 164).

This leads us to the classical period of Hollywood, beginning some time around the start of the twentieth century and ending around the 1960s. This time period has generated much scholarship in film studies with different schools of thought accompanying their respective arguments. Developed alongside the classic novel, the films of this time drew inspiration from the novels and from theatre. The melodramatic strains that came out of the classical novels seemed to flourish in Hollywood cinema, now that it was made by the bourgeois, for the bourgeois (Kaplan 272).³⁵³⁶ Initially theorising in the 1950s in France, Andre Bazin was one of the first to outline the practices of camera work, editing and sound as methods that represented cinema ‘in its essence’ (Kaplan 273). Bazin placed high importance on the practice of montage, narrative coherence and unity of filmic elements, claiming that these elements defined the best in Hollywood. Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson’s influential *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* has very clearly delineated certain aesthetic features to identify this period, with the way a film organises

³⁵ Kaplan acknowledges the tension between the notions of ‘classical’ and its high-brow connotations, and the ‘sensationalism and spectacle of melodrama’, previously established in this thesis as being lower class (272). However, she finds that narratives such as Greek melodrama, ‘while anticipating some of the modes of hysteria and excess of late eighteenth-century melodrama, is situated in a very different relation to its audience’ (272).

³⁶ Kaplan uses Brooks’s definition of the melodramatic imagination and relates it to Hollywood, stating that ‘all Hollywood genres are melodrama attempting an ethical recentring, a “search for a new plentitude in reaction to the decentring of modern consciousness” (Brooks 1976)’ (Kaplan 278).

narrative time and space, the continuity script, management structure and division of labour in production being the key identifying elements. For them, ‘the principles which Hollywood claims as its own rely on notions of decorum, proportion, formal harmony, respect for tradition, mimesis, self-effacing craftsmanship, and cool control of the perceiver’s response – canons which critics in any medium usually call “classical”’ (Bordwell, et al. 3–4). Richard Maltby is of a different opinion; for him Hollywood works by a commercial aesthetic and thereby focuses on an approach called ‘consumerist criticism’ (7). Maltby considers the audiences of these films, focusing on what viewers use movies for, and how these movies are organised to deliver pleasure to their audiences (7, 9).

Whichever school of thought one might choose to subscribe to, an undeniable trait of the films made post 1920s was that they showed a marked difference in their format, the process of production and the narratives employed. Studios became extremely powerful in this period of cinema; so did the performers themselves. The technology for animation had developed by 1920 – already several popular animated films were released and audiences bought tickets, a sign that is generally taken as encouragement by production studios with regard to a film’s success (Gardner 61). And since the comic strip adaptations had an established fan base among the younger audiences, the rates of their success were also quite high (Gardner 64). Hollywood’s focus on ‘regeneration of realism in storytelling’ and its insistence on ‘bringing together real time, in which things exist, along with the duration of the action’ inevitably influenced the comic book films of the time (Bazin 39).

Things had significantly changed for comic books as well. Dr Frederic Wertham published *The Psychopathy of Comic Books* (1948) and *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) in support of the rising movement against comic books for children. One of the publishing houses under direct attack was comic book company Entertaining Comics (EC), led by William

Gaines, a company that published comics primarily in the horror genre.³⁷ These were popular comics for the adult sensitivities, but parents of the time developed anxieties owing to the effect these comics would have on their children. Indeed, some children who were found guilty of crimes also happened to be avid readers of comic books (Gardner 76–77, Morton 43). The result of this movement was the Comics Code Authority (CCA), a committee that would oversee the content published by comics – only if they found that the material followed the guidelines set by the committee did they give the books the CCA seal of approval. One of the major guidelines to be followed was one forbidding ‘all scenes of horror, excessive bloodshed, gore, and gruesome crimes, depravity, lust, sadism, masochism’ (Gabilliet 39, qtd. in Morton 44). Major comic book companies, DC and Marvel included, now had to alter a lot of the material from their earlier publications. The previously mentioned comic serials of the time, from *Dick Tracy* to *Superman* to *Flash Gordon* had to align with the stories being published by their comic counterparts.

Though extremely popular for their time, these serials and films are not considered by comic book scholars or film scholars for anything other than the nostalgic value they offer, if that. A reason for this could be that these serials mostly developed their own material, turning to the comics for characters that would secure its relevance as a comic book adaptation (Morton 3). The quality of these productions was ‘something of a letdown’, made ‘cheaply’ by production houses that could not afford much more (Dixon and Graham 6). The Batman serials of 1943 and 1949 are rarely spoken about, though George Reeves’s Superman in *The Adventures of Superman* and *Superman and the Mole Man* provided inspiration for future iterations of the characters (Gordon 74, 76). Future writers and producers found ways to keep these characters alive by tying them back to their radio and TV origins by reusing the same

³⁷ Round (2014) traces the history of horror comics, particularly from publishing house Entertaining Comics, which was most popular for their horror comics.

dialogues, with guest appearances and other similar playful references (for further details, see Gordon).

The situation changed once again by the 1960s for Hollywood and for the comic book industry. While the war had been good for the comic book industry (which was now thriving), the advent of televisions had not been good for Hollywood. The crash of the studio system and oversaturated glamour of grand storylines in a time of major world shifts made critics of Hollywood dismissive of the film industry. As Kramer notes, '[t]he stability and continuity of the studio system, the undifferentiated mass audience, the dominance of traditional storytelling and transparent entertainment, and the centrality of cinema on American life were all things of the past' (295). Not all scholars were fond of the films that came out of this time: Pauline Kael was among the critics of this New Hollywood, who found a disintegration of film culture stemming out of a disintegration of filmic narrative. Films from New Hollywood were filled with spectacular attractions and shock effects that enthused audiences and there was marked 'lack of concern for coherent storytelling on the part of producers and directors in charge of the volatile and overblown process of filmmaking' (Kramer 296). When *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) was released, critics claimed Hollywood's renaissance finally occurred. Kael declared the film to be 'the most excitingly American American movie', creating 'a different kind of contact with an American audience from the kind that is made by European films' (Kael 47). Indeed, many filmmakers of this time were those who had trained under the studio system of the 1930s and were influenced by the thriving world cinema in European countries. Audiences' interests had also changed by this time; the end to the star system that Hollis Alpert ascribes to television's influence on the younger viewers brought about new interests in characters, attention to stylistic devices, symbolic messages and thematic ambiguities in the films of the time (337, Kramer 297–298).

Developments in the 1970s changed American cinema once more, with new directors like Steven Spielberg and George Lucas placing importance on special effects and cinematic spectacle (Neale 105). Since the incorporation of studios into industrial conglomerates in the mid-1960s, new delivery systems of film viewing were introduced, so audiences could watch their favourite films via pay cable and home video. The marketing of films had also grown; so films were marketed not just with licensed merchandise, but also through pop songs and computer games, lending to the hybridity that would encompass the superhero narrative (Collins 167). The Hollywood blockbusters were by no means critically appreciated films – multiple scholars and critics have noted their return to a psychologically and politically regressive outlook (Wood 146–147; Britton 98, 104) and the film industry’s increasingly narrow focus on the heavily promoted big-budget films (Monaco, chapters 1–3; Kramer 301). Kramer thus defines New Hollywood ‘in terms of a postmodern multi-media world which undermines the very notion of “film as a distinct medium”’ (301). And it was in this period of film that people believed a man could fly.

From the very beginning, the producers of *Superman: The Movie* (1978) knew that they wanted their film to be everything that the comics were not (Morton 47). They mentioned as much in an interview with *Los Angeles Times* in 1975, declaring that the film would be ‘100% straight, no spoof, no satire ... the opposite of a cartoon’ (Mary Murphy, qtd. in Morton 47). To do so, they hired Mario Puzo, well known by this point for *The Godfather* (1972), to write the script, cast Marlon Brando and Gene Hackman (both Oscar winners) to play the roles of Jor-El (Superman’s father) and supervillain Lex Luthor respectively. They hired more writers, specifically David Newman – who was best known for *Bonnie and Clyde* – to ensure that the script would have no campy elements to it. With scripts for what would become the first two films of the franchise, they brought along Richard Donner to direct, a man who truly believed in the film’s inherent verisimilitude (Morton 47). With Christopher Reeve and Margot Kidder

cast as Superman and Lois Lane respectively, the film strove for audiences to take it seriously, exclaiming that ‘You’ll believe a man can fly!’ The film became among the most profitable of its time and received critical acclaim.

The success of the first film provided enough encouragement for sequels, even though the budget, and thereby the quality of production of these films, dropped in standards. The first film was mired in lawsuits as well, with the writers and performers demanding their due of the profits that had mostly gone to the producers of the film (Morton 40–50). However, nostalgia played a huge factor in this franchise’s success, as Gordon elaborates in *Superman: The Persistence of an American Icon* (2017). *Superman: The Movie* tapped into the 1950s nostalgia by hiring an actor to play the eponymous role with similar enough names – Christopher Reeve and George Reeves both played Superman – and used the lines that had come out of the radio show that eventually became character defining traits of the character. Three sequels and a spin-off film for Supergirl (directed by Jeannot Szwarc, 1984) followed with behind-the-scenes tensions and, eventually, unsuccessful results at the box office (Morton 51). A drawback the films seemed to be finding (apart from budgeting) among producers was that the narratives were “‘too sci-fi”, too embedded in Superman lore ... [were] pandering to comics devotees and would require too much exposition for casual audience members’ (Rossen 135).

Superman: The Movie marked a significant cultural birth for the ways that superheroes could be showcased on screens. Donner’s vision of verisimilitude and the casting of star performers laid a foundational format for future comic book films. Granted, not all comic book films would follow in its footsteps, and not all would be as successful if they had followed in *Superman*’s footsteps. The tagline that accompanies the film, ‘You’ll believe a man can fly’, seemed to be the key to dealing with such larger-than-life stories. Critics of the time would state that the film managed to master ‘every challenge in presenting the man who leaps tall

buildings in a single bound’ and that the makers of the film do not ‘let the silliness get out of control. It’s easy enough to just enter their world and adjust to the new realities’ (Harwood).

While *Superman: The Movie* showcased the potential for how a superhero narrative could be adapted into film with considerable commercial success, the next superhero film to become extremely popular would be *Batman* (1989), which was initially met with uncertainty ended up bringing about a whole wave of Batmania.³⁸ Audiences loved this new Batman, enjoying that ‘Director Tim Burton obviously wants to ... tell a more adult kind of story’, while certain critics were doubtful of this approach to comic book films (Ebert and Siskel) (Morton 57). Interestingly enough, scholars have engaged with this film by noting the Gothic elements that director Tim Burton has imbued into the film. For Mishra, the film is significant in thematising the ‘persistence of the Gothic sublime in late (post) modernity’ (297). Smith, who finds the character ‘replete with Gothic imagery’ anyway, notes the impact of Frank Miller’s writing on the mythos of the Batman (253). For Markodimitrakis, even the launch of the trailer for *Batman* was replete with Gothic symbolism, noting ‘the importance of uncanny elements in the success of the trailer’ to be showcased in ‘the only cast credits ... those of Nicholson and Keaton, and instead of a title it had the bat-symbol front and centre’ (1162).

Batman (1989) became popular enough to launch its own franchise of films and multiple reboots in the span of 10 years. Marvel Comics would undergo multiple organisational changes and finally find filmic success in *Blade* (1999). But these first two films created a kind of template for what comic book films would look like when developed for the big screens in the new millennium. The ability to manage comic-literate fan expectations, casual movie-viewing audiences and critical acclaim was a challenge that comic book films faced. With these first two films, *Superman: The Movie* and *Batman*, it seemed that creators found relief in making the characters and the situations they face somewhat accessible to audiences. How were

³⁸ For further reading on this, see *The Many Lives of Batman and Panel to Screen*, ch 2.

these characters presented as accessible? What changes occurred when adapting from one format to the other? What did the term ‘superhero’, and thereby the term ‘supervillain’, mean for movie audiences? These are some of the questions the next section takes a look at.

Defining the Superhero and the Supervillain

A few days before *Superman: The Movie* was released, Christopher Reeve was interviewed and asked about his approach to Superman. He took on the dual role of portraying Clark Kent and Superman with the understanding of their respective distinct personalities. For him, Clark Kent was ‘really Superman acting like a schlepper and having a good time at it’; while Superman is ‘an alien, and what makes him super is he’s got the wisdom to use his powers well’ (Carlinsky). Critical reviews of the film were mixed; Canby states that the ‘comic strip has been carefully, elaborately, sometimes wittily blown up for the big theatre screen, which though busy, often seems sort of empty’. But Reeve’s performance of the superhero was ‘totally believable’ for Gene Siskel, ‘a delight’ for Jack Kroll and ‘immediately likable’ for Pauline Kael. Canby himself finds that Reeve ‘manages to be both funny and comic-strip heroic without making a fool of himself’.

The supervillain of the film, Gene Hackman’s Lex Luthor was met with mixed reactions. Canby found that the ‘movie’s brightest moments are those very broad ones supplied by Mr. Hackman’, while Siskel finds that ‘Hackman is not the least bit threatening as a villain’ (Canby). Champlin was much more critical of Hackman’s Luthor – for him the villain was ‘an essential problem’, and ‘even in a succession of wigs, Gene Hackman is not preposterous, funny or dementedly menacing, and what he’s doing here is not evident’ (Champlin).

Yet another famous adaptation of comic books calls for discussion: the 1966 film and subsequent TV serial, *Batman*. Reactions to the TV serial were mixed, with some critics finding it to be ‘an emblematic example of commercial trash with its childish heroes, melodramatic plots, and formulaic structure’ (Spiegel and Jenkins 121). For others, it embodied all that critics

valued about the television programmes with its ‘hyperrealism’ and ‘complete simulation of real-life events’ (Spigel and Jenkins 121). Magazines like *Time*, *Newsweek* and *Saturday Evening Post* understood the programme as one that would appeal to both children and adults, where children would see Batman as a hero and adults would see Batman as a ‘campy put-on’ (qtd. in Spigel and Jenkins 124). There seems to have been no other way to read this version of Batman. Together with the young and quippy Robin, this Batman seemed to be in on the joke of how ridiculous his world is, winking at the adults in the audience who all realise that Batman’s world makes no sense.

What did somehow resonate and create a lasting impact was Cesar Romero’s performance as the Joker. Scholar David Ray Carter notes that this performance of the Joker emphasised the criminal and comedic aspects of the Joker’s villainy, and though still present, not so much the intellectual (52). Comic scholar Peter Sanderson found this Joker to be ‘comparatively tame and thoroughly dated’, but one important aspect of the Joker’s villainy would emerge as a highlight out of this series and continue into various other adaptations (Sanderson 43). In the episode titled ‘The Joker Trumps an Ace/Batman Sets the Pace’, the Joker attempts to steal \$500,000, but this is only secondary; his main goal is to publicly embarrass the Batman. This need to make a fool of the Dark Knight forms a major part of the Joker’s villainy, and this particular aspect would influence animated versions of the late 1960s.

What becomes evident from these readings of popular comic book adaptations is the ways in which popular characters were slightly rewritten for the TV or film watching audiences of these stories. The superheroes of the comics themselves were constantly being rewritten, growing from experiences and situations they faced and also based on who was writing the latest run of that comic. Both the heroes and villains in the comics had the advantage of having existed longer and therefore having longer histories with their audiences. For film media, however, the expected audience’s demands of the material were different, and successful

adaptations required altered material. Take Superman, for example. Gerard Jones's extensive study of the two creators of Superman is worth reading, but a brief history of how Superman came to be is essential to understand where our superheroes come from.

As Jones writes it, both Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster were fans of the science fiction comics and novels that were being published between the late 1920s and the early 1930s (63–76). Siegel had his own experience with publishing magazines, from his school days, and Shuster seemed to have been a natural when it came to sketching. Siegel was a big fan of the Shadow, Zorro and The Scarlet Pimpernel, and among his first few stories exists an angry Superman, one who uses violence at will and, one who did not care for Lois Lane. Upon hitting magazine stands and becoming a massive hit, Action Comics signed a deal with Hecker Products for a radio programme (Gordon 21). Such commercial strategies that Action Comics took to promote Superman subsequently created an American icon out of him, as Gordon finds. (24). It was in 1942, in the third season of the radio show, that Superman becomes a symbol for 'truth, justice, and the American Way' (Gordon 43). This phrase was used in the animated shows produced by Fleisher studios and went on to become characteristic of Superman's brand of heroism.

Similar stories are brought to light when discussing the origins of other renowned superheroes, stories where multiple factors contribute to the meaning of a superhero's heroism. Created to represent the 'fears and frustrations endemic to adolescence and the atomic age', Spider-Man was nothing like the famous Fantastic Four, or the popularly angry Hulk. Spider-Man was not all powerful and would constantly take beatings from the colourful band of villains he encountered, and yet audiences found him to be extremely endearing, with one reader's letter claiming that 'Spider-Man is not the most human Marvel hero! Peter Parker is!' (Gardner 109–112). The same goes for supervillainy as well, both having deep-rooted beginnings. Bill Finger and Jerry Robinson, who watched German Expressionist films together

and visited the Metropolitan Museum, would go on to create the Joker, the Batman's arch-villain from the very beginning (Jones 153). The Joker would grow more villainous, as the Batman would simultaneously become more heroic and tragic. These learnings bring us to question what exactly it is that defines the superheroes and supervillains? How is their meaning generated, and who contributes to these meanings?

Peter Coogan's oft-quoted and renowned *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* takes an interesting approach to defining the superhero. Coogan clearly states that a superhero is

a heroic character with a selfless, pro-social mission; with superpowers – extraordinary abilities, highly developed physical, mental or mystical skills, or advanced technology; who has a superhero identity embodied in a codename and iconic costume, which typically expresses his biography or character, powers, or origin (transformation from ordinary person to superhero); and is generically distinct, i.e., can be distinguished from characters or related genres (fantasy, science fiction, detective, etc.) by a preponderance of generic conventions. Often superheroes have dual identities, the ordinary one of which is usually a closely guarded secret. (30)

He similarly defines the supervillain as a villain who is super, who commits villainous or evil acts and does so in a way that is superior to ordinary criminals, or at a magnified level. The supervillain represents the inversion of the superhero's virtues and values of a society or culture, and has the ability to enact that inversion. Coogan identifies five types of supervillains, namely the monster, the enemy commander, the mad scientist, the criminal mastermind and the inverted superhero-supervillain. Additionally, he finds that aliens, evil gods, the figure of the femme fatale and the super-henchmen might at times rise to the standards of supervillain (Coogan 61–115).

In Tomabechi's recent work on supervillains in comic books, he identifies supervillains in terms of their cultural context, using ideology from Stuart Hall and concepts of Otherness to define the supervillain. For him, supervillains are 'culturally informative figures that foster debate about normality/abnormality and majority/minority binaries' (Tomabechi 5). He then distinguishes between a 'super villain' and a 'supervillain', identifying the former as a 'master

villain of fiction’ and the latter as ‘the antagonist of the superhero genre’ who ‘can be found in other genres and media forms’ (10). While supervillains have proven to be quite fruitful areas of study, they are not necessarily genre-based figures, an idea that this thesis uses as the starting point of inquiry. As has been discussed above, the comic book superheroes and their narratives have multiple sources influencing their narratives at all times. Limiting the supervillain of any of the archetypes in superhero narratives to one genre disregards the wide history that these characters have carried.

These definitions of superheroes are based on the comic book superhero, one that began with Superman in Action Comics in 1938. Since then, multiple superheroes with distinct defining traits and storylines have been created, for whom this definition would be perfectly sufficient. However, as has been discussed earlier, the superhero did not begin with Superman. Superman himself, when initially created, was not the superhero that was popularised, as has been discussed in detail by Gordon (2017) and Jones (2004). Superman’s heroism came about through multiple influences; Batman’s heroism, born out of tragedy, also finds multiple influences that have affected his storyline. Captain America, the Human Torch, Namor the Submariner and Daredevil are all superheroes who had previous lives in other comic companies or had completely different personalities. The next section discusses these stories using narrative theory to understand the specific role played by these characters and the effect they have had upon the narrative.

The Function of the Villain in Narrative Theory

Having looked at the origins of villainy, types of villainy, and focusing specifically on the type that this study is interested in, this chapter will now examine the role of the villain in a narrative text. The study of narrative and characters in a narrative text has been undertaken by multiple scholars. Beginning with Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale* (1968), specific elements of a narrative text have been singled out, analysed and understood for their

role in the narrative text. Narrative itself has had a much longer history of scholarship, beginning arguably with Plato's *Republic*, which discusses narration and the narrative voice (Onega and Garcia-Landa 13). It was around the early 1970s that narrative theory picked up its pace, with structuralists like Todorov, Barthes and Genette coining the term 'Narratology', which details the modes of narrative analysis and the five codes to understand the science of narrative respectively (Todorov 1969; Barthes 1977; Genette 1980). Levi-Strauss would provide his critique of what Propp had laid out (1978); Stanzel would identify narrative situations and the modes in which such situations are narratively signalled (1984) and Bakhtin would identify a chronotope – which he uses to refer to the unity of time and space inherent to a narrative (1981).

Narrative, in film specifically, has also had extensive scholarship engage with it. Seymour Chatman, David Bordwell, Edward Branigan and others take a psychoanalytic approach to understanding narrative, and more specifically to understand audience perception of a narrative text. Chatman's theory of narration is reliant on the presence of the 'implied author', who empowers others with no voice of his/her own to speak (85). This implied author is the text itself, 'communicat[ing] something different from what the narrator says, that meaning must occur between the lines' (Chatman 85). Bordwell's study focuses on a cognitive narrative process, insisting that most films have a 'construct[ed] narrator', considering the narrator to be a projection on the part of the viewer (62). Branigan continues this cognitive train of thought, but by focusing on what he calls the 'non-focalised narration' by a neutral voice – stating that a shot can be justified to be subjective only when under the perception of the character (Branigan 107). Verstraten is of the opinion that the filmic narrator's main function is 'to show moving images (possibly with printed text) and to produce sound (possibly in the guise of spoken text)' (7). For him, filmic narration is defined as showing a moving image 'with the option of adding either editing or sound' (Verstraten 8). He adds,

... the showing of moving images concerns a first level of narrativity ... filmic showing is never a neutral act, however, but always already an interpretation by the visual narrator. This narrative agent is responsible for choosing who or what can be seen, for locating the characters with regard to each other, and for determining the kind of lighting in the shot. (8–9)

Buckland uses principles laid out by Robert Burgoyne to understand narrative analysis as distinguishing elements such as ‘story outline and plot structure, the roles played by the characters or actors, the way narrative information is channelled through point of view, and the relationship of the narrative discourse to the inhabitants and events of the fictional world’ (3). For Buckland, distinctions between the sequence of character centred actions/events, their rearrangement or reorganisation, the narrators, authors, enunciators, that is, agents who control the spectator’s access to the sequence of actions/events, and the manifestation of actions, events and agents in a particular medium form an essential foundation to understanding film narrative (ix). Since this study will be focusing on a single character and its function in a narrative text, this model of understanding narrative in film will prove useful.

Buckland elaborates that narrative comprises ‘a set of linear, temporal sequence of actions and events carried out by characters that form a self-enclosed, unified whole’ (12). Further, he defines characters as ‘actantial roles’ and actions as ‘functions’, whereby functions are ordered into an internally cohesive structure and an ‘actant’ is an agent that carries out a function (12). Propp identified seven actants in his study of Russian folktales, one of which is the villain. Further, he identified thirty-one narrative functions – defined in terms of single actions carried out by each of the actants. So, each actant, according to Propp, would carry out functions within their own sphere of action (79–83). The sphere of action of the villain constitutes ‘villainy; a fight or other forms of struggle with the hero; pursuit’ (Propp 79).

While this may be true, the villain is not limited to these three actions. What, then, would constitute villainy? And how does this simplified description of the villain lead to a deeper understanding of the function this actant carries out. As Buckland also finds, for Propp

the action-functions performed by the actants were primary, the actants themselves secondary when considering the study of a narrative (14). Since it is this study's aim to look at a specific actant, Propp's analysis does not prove sufficient to understand the villain and his function in a narrative text.

An interesting aspect of Propp's study to note, at this point, is that most of the thirty-one functions he identifies are functions carried out in relation to the hero of the narrative text. Propp's actants themselves are defined, Buckland notes, not by their own individual intrinsic qualities, but rather in terms of their structural relation to other actants. For example, 'the hero is defined in opposition to the villain and is conferred the task of rescuing the princess' (Buckland 13). As noted earlier, one of the functions in the villain's sphere of actions is that of 'a fight or other forms of struggle with the hero' (Propp 79). Since this study focuses only on the villain of the narrative text, it will be primarily considering the functions performed by the villain in a narrative text. Specifically, this study will focus on the functions performed by this actant that ensure its own narrative focalization, its ability to create a sense of mystery in a narrative text and the types that emerge to ensure that this actant could apply to multiple scenarios/story types/genres.

What James Bond and the Joker Have in Common: Mobile Signifiers

Propp's basic understanding of the function of the villain may have been suitable for the texts engaged with at the time, but for the scope of this study, more discussion of this actant is necessary. Especially since the study concerns itself with the supervillain – a term in itself that has been discussed – and having thus far engaged with literary texts primarily belonging to the Gothic and Victorian eras of literature. Based on the discussion thus far, the study aims to locate the arch-villain of the Gothic and Victorian literary texts in the supervillain of superhero narrative films. This study undertakes this task not just by identifying common characteristics or narrative tropes, but by identifying the actants as mobile signifiers, a concept

discussed in a previous section. Originally from the Lacanian school of thought, a mobile signifier is meant to act as a point of significance, or ‘anchorage’ (Lacan and Wilden 273). The purpose of this point of anchorage is to bring the ‘indefinite (transposition) of signification’ to stop functioning ‘by reference back to a symbolic function’ (Lacan and Wilden 273–274).

In a study about James Bond and the cultural significance of the fictional character, Bennett and Woollacott have found it best to understand the different iterations of Bond as a ‘moving sign of the times’ or a ‘signifier that floats and connects’ the different texts of Bond (19). Bond’s gendered identity as a phallic symbol aids in this construction as a point of anchorage, serving as ‘an ideological shorthand for the appropriate image of masculinity in relation to which feminine sexual identities were to be constructed’ (Bennet and Woollacott 35). Collins expands the idea of the shifting signifier to the superhero, discussing the hyperconsciousness of popular narrative generated with regard to Batman in the 1980s (165, 167). Multiple activations of the figure of the superhero, and reactivations of the Batman during this time, lead to what Collins calls a creation of a hybrid text – involving not just the release of comic books but also the utilisation of multiple media formats (166). As a hybrid text, the superhero narrative then reveals its own fluidity, finding itself able to mix different forms of discourse and media while still retelling the tale of the Batman (Collins 165–167).

Thus, when we understand superheroes and supervillains as shifting signifiers, the scope of the study broadens to not just identify one version of the actant, but rather all of them as forming one cohesive narrative in the mythos of that actant. We can note how certain characteristics belonging to an actant from Early Gothic novels that have successfully carried on to comic book films could be read together. Further, Collins’s discussion of the hyperconscious that is ever present in the popular cultural texts leads to an understanding of what he calls ‘hybrid popular narratives’ – ‘distinguished by their adoption of those well-known semantic units, deployed according to substantially *different* syntactic strategies’ (178,

original emphasis). We can thereby note that every hero has a supervillain, a villain that mirrors them, matches or supersedes their intellect, and/or works behind the superhero's realm of knowing on their villainous plans. And while such supervillains have appeared in both comic books and film adaptations of said comic books, this study will be focusing on three major adaptations, three different supervillains.

Main Texts for Analysis

As has been mentioned above, this thesis focuses on three supervillains: Thanos, the Joker and Harley Quinn. Each of these characters has been chosen for this study as they have each had films in which they are the actant through which the film narrative is focalized; *Avengers: Infinity War* for Thanos, *Joker* for the Joker and *Birds of Prey* for Harley Quinn. Prior to these films, each character has made appearances in other films, sometimes belonging in the same storyworld as their own film, and sometimes not. In these prior films, these supervillains were not the actants, they did not function as the narrators for the film. Their intentions are never fully known, their inner worlds never fully revealed, since those narratives were told from the perspective of their opponent, the superhero. However, in the main texts analysed for this thesis, these three supervillains are the narrators, they are the actants whose actions set the plot in motion, they are the protagonists of these narratives. It is quite rare for a superhero narrative to dedicate this level of narrativity to the supervillains; although there are some precedents in the comic books, such an event had not yet occurred on film.

The first of the three supervillains who will be studied is Thanos. First introduced in Marvel Comics' 'The Invincible Iron Man #55' (1973), Thanos was the wayward son of a ruler who demanded his own seat at the table. Over the years, Thanos became well-known for being the 'Mad Titan', with a single-minded goal to amass the power of the universe by acquiring the Infinity Gems (the films in the Marvel Cinematic Universe rename them Infinity Stones). Comic writer and artist Jim Starlin was inspired by the Freudian principle of the Death Drive

(Thanatos) when creating Thanos, which manifests in the Titan's worshipful reverence of Mistress Death – the Marvel Comic Universe's female manifestation of Death. Though the films do not elaborate on this relationship, those spanning the first three phases of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) follow Thanos's journey towards obtaining the Infinity Stones and his subsequent victory over the superheroes. For the most part, Thanos's appearances are limited to post-credit scenes, never truly revealing himself and yet achieving his goals without the heroes' awareness of his machinations, just as the master criminal in Victorian Gothic literature. The presentation of Thanos as the Gothic villain, modelled after Demonic traits, culminates in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), a film that finally reveals his motivations and goes on to show him succeeding. His appearances throughout the MCU and similar connecting threads that form the coherent filmic universe will be explored in the first chapter.

Thanos's motives lean towards a utilitarian mode of thinking, which multiple scholars have discussed in the years since the film's release. In the book *Avengers: Infinity Saga and Philosophy* (2020), the consequences of Thanos's Snap (to kill 50 per cent of all living beings), the ethical implications of Thanos's villainy and other aspects of the two films *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) are discussed with a philosophical framework. Additionally, Thanos views himself as a hero-villain burdened to accomplish his task, just as the 'man of feeling' did in multiple texts from Gothic and Victorian contexts. To accomplish this Promethean task that Thanos sets upon himself, the film calls us to empathise with the Mad Titan through his relationship with his adopted daughter Gamora. As the chapter will analyse, the benefit of being the focalizer of *Infinity War* allows for Thanos's sacrifice to seem heroic, when his actions veer towards villainy. Further, in Tomabechi's book on supervillains, the monster figure as a supervillain is discussed. He finds that the monster 'encompasses all, suggesting that there is no limit to what the monster can represent and embody' (110). Indeed, Botting also finds that in Gothic literature, the monster is used as a 'composite term for a range

of negative and anti-social features' ('Monstrosity' 205). Tomabechi further finds that monsters are 'created as warnings as well as embodiments of social anxieties' (95). This thesis finds that just as his example of DC supervillain Darkseid, Thanos's representation as a figure of authority acting 'in extremes to deprive others of freedom' forms a clear contrast to the superhero's American ideals of freedom and liberty (Tomabechi 95–96).

The next chapter moves on to discuss one of the most popular villains of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the Joker. He was created by the team composed of Bill Finger, Bob Kane and Jerry Robinson in 1940 to be the arch-villain of the Batman. Drawing from various sources, as all comic book makers of the time did, the Joker's creepy smile and evil plans to destroy quickly made him a villain to be reckoned with. What further set him apart from other supervillains of the time was that his origins were never known. Ten years down the line when a possible origin story was given to audiences, it was disregarded just as quickly by a second origin story. This unpredictability became a major defining aspect of the Joker's mythos, which makes looking at *Joker* (2019) even more interesting for the purposes of this study. *Joker* looks at an alternative reality in which the Batman has not donned his cowl yet, Gotham is in disarray and Arthur Fleck has a mental illness – all elements that lead to him wearing clown make-up and creating chaos. Though major scholarship views Arthur Fleck as a victim of his circumstances, and the film certainly makes this a major point in the narrative, this study considers *Joker* to be yet another in a series of origin stories that the Joker uses to disorient audiences.

Through exploring the mythos of the Joker, this second chapter places *Joker* and its protagonist as the supervillain in the popular trend of origin stories that are common among superhero films. The Joker, however, still remains unknown; his truth is never fully revealed as the narrative of the film contends with Arthur Fleck's mental illness and his hallucinations. As the unreliable narrator then, the Joker represents the Gothic Unknown and the fear that this

Unknown presents to those who come into its presence. This fear of the Unknown embodied in the Joker seems to haunt Arthur as well, lending the film a sense of paranoia. For Punter, paranoid fiction seemingly ‘implicate[s]’ the reader, placing them ‘in a situation of ambiguity with regard to fears within the text’ (*The Literature of Terror Vol 2*, 183). Further, the ‘attribution of persecution remains uncertain’, and the text thus invites the reader to share the doubts and uncertainties pervading the story (*The Literature of Terror Vol 2*, 183). Fleck’s illness leads him to create and enact delusions, and the film never differentiates between the chronological events of the film and the delusions that Arthur experiences. As the chapter explores, this narrative element adds to the sense of uncertainty and ambiguity, bringing it closer to the Gothic mode.

Joker as a film differs from the established superhero narrative by eliminating the presence of superheroes altogether. In doing so, the film re-establishes the archetypes previously famously assigned to these actants; for example Thomas Wayne, the Batman’s father and a pillar of good in the mythos of Gotham, is depicted as a power-hungry businessman-turned-politician, and the Joker is depicted as a figure of sympathy. The film then further enhances the superhero narrative’s inherent genre flexibility in its revision of what the term ‘supervillain’ indicates. Taylor’s discussion of the superhero narrative and genre identifies ‘superhero cinema’ as ‘both beyond and about conventions, formulae, rules, systems, and traditions in which audiences are most economically invested’ (‘Genre and Superhero Cinema’ 103). This chapter discusses *Joker* in terms of the narrative approach taken to understand this supervillain and the generic tropes activated by the film.

The chapter also utilises the concept of the grotesque to analyse the narrative’s focus on Arthur Fleck’s body, identifying his physical and aural presence as a signifier of the human body that ‘outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits’ (Bakhtin 26). Bakhtin’s grotesque body was a comic body, one that is ‘invigorated and renewed by its embrace of the earthly’ (Hurley

138). More specifically, Bakhtin's focus was on the medieval carnival, a festival of common people that 'celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order' (10–11). Similarly, Victor Hugo identifies the grotesque applied to images of the ugly, thereby linking it with the 'aesthetically monstrous and extremes of the comic, or both in combination' (Cornwell 175). Wolfgang Kayser, however, focuses on the 'ominous, nocturnal, and abysmal features' of the grotesque in literature and art (18). The grotesque here involves 'contradictions that are not reconciled, moments of disjunction and rupture that are not smoothed over' (Hurley 142). Fleck's outward display of his mental illness through the painful laughter, and the film's focus on his body through the dance performances and moments of stillness which show protruding bones, both are displays of the grotesque. The chapter finds similarities with Hugo's work as well, placing the grotesque in contrast with itself and identifying Gothic horror in the Joker.

Things change considerably when analysing the third villain of this study, Harley Quinn. To begin with, Harley does not have an origin in the comic books, she was introduced in the popular television show *Batman: The Animated Series* (1992–1995) midway through a season, with close to no context. Starting out as the Joker's henchwoman, her first few appearances made it clear that she was a villain to be feared. At the same time, creators of the show also toyed with the idea of Harley as her own person, questioning what kind of woman would agree to remain loyal to a villain as terrible as the Joker and thereby resorting to stress how 'bizarre and creepy that could be' (Archbold). Increased exposure of Harley delighted fans, which led to *Batman: Mad Love*, the animated film and subsequent comic book origin story for Harley that proved her status as a victim in her relationship with the Joker. After enduring years of abuse, Harley breaks out from under the Joker's wing and sets out on her own without foregoing her natural instincts towards hellraising. The change in her is best viewed in the New-52 comic reboot of her character, where she acknowledges her abusive past,

accepts herself for her criminal tendencies and yet still manages to look out for the underdog when able. Her relationship – in comic books – with fellow villainess Poison Ivy is a major asset for Quinn to understand herself, to be able to break off her long relationship with the Joker. Her live-action film appearances follow similar storylines, with *Birds of Prey* (2020) exploring Harley's journey to self-discovery.

Quinn's actantial function as the monstrous woman, as a victim of abuse and her subsequent journey of self-empowerment shifting her characterisation into an anti-hero are discussed in the third chapter of this thesis. Quinn's representation draws inspiration from multiple sources, and feminist theory thus becomes essential to understanding the representation of Quinn's sexuality. As the chapter finds, Quinn's status as a woman leads to her being viewed as the Other, lending to an overt objectification with minimal subjectivity offered. Quinn's subjectivity is activated when the narrative is focalized through her perception, when she is the narrator of the text. The chapter thus uses the Female Gothic to activate reading Quinn's narrative through a defined 'female gaze', resulting in the realised anti-hero whose criminal actions are reminiscent of the femme fatale's need to survive in a world that expects her to remain within the patriarchal law. This journey to self-actualisation is one that mirrors the female Gothic plot, where the focus shifts from the Gothic villain to the Gothic heroine and her journey to achieving community.

The heroic call to adventure, being the first step in the hero's journey, is one that features prominently in multiple texts, including superhero narratives. While multiple factors could contribute to this call to adventure, one of the main motivating factors is found to be a love that varies for each character. Of the eight forms of love, two feature prominently in superhero media, that of eros – romantic or passionate love – and philia, that of deep friendship or affectionate regard (D'Angelo). The MCU in particular prominently features heroes displaying philia, in the friendships formed between each of the Avengers, Steve Rogers and

Bucky Barnes, Rocket Raccoon and Groot, and many more. While eros is also present in certain narratives, such as the relationships between Tony Stark and Pepper Potts, Thor and Jane Foster and others, these relationships are not the driving force of their heroism. However, another unique feature in Harley Quinn's narrative appears in the favouring of romantic love as her narrative is deeply entrenched in her romantic relationship with the Joker.

While the favouring of one type of love over the other limits the superhero's narrative connections with the ancient archetypes that have inspired these texts, such favouring of one type of love over the other in the aforementioned texts could be a result of the gendered narratives themselves. In most MCU films, the primary narrator is male, and thus a Male Gothic plot is enacted, which follows the actions of the hero whose power makes him an 'isolated overreacher' and as a result of which, having defeated the evil that threatens his world, he achieves a kind of 'spiritual inoculation' (Williams 102–105). This plot allows for multiple points of view, and thus the supernatural reality 'is a reality one must simply accept in "that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment that constitutes poetic faith"' (Williams 103). Alternatively, in Quinn's narrative, the Female Gothic plot is enacted, which is told entirely from the heroine's perspective and thus 'generates suspense through the limitations imposed' by the singular point of view; 'we share both the heroine's often mistaken perceptions and her ignorance' (Williams 104). Furthermore, the Female Gothic plot is affirmative; '[s]he is awakened to a world in which love is not only possible but available' (Williams 105).

The first part of each chapter discusses the origins of each of the supervillains and briefly examines their previous appearances across media. By doing so, this study analyses each of the supervillains as mobile signifiers, identifying their initial point of anchorage and other elements of their characterisation that have impacted their appearance in the live-action films. As mentioned earlier, for Lacan, the points of anchorage functioned as signifiers in creating a gendered identity – particularly for the male child who 'takes on the phallus as

signifier' (Lacan and Wilden 240). Considering the two masculine-coded supervillains that this thesis analyses, each of their identities as men then forms an essential point of anchorage in the construction of their masculinity, and thereby their villainy.³⁹ Harley Quinn's gender plays an essential role in the construction of her villainous identity, as it has in the construction of her narrative role since the inception of her character. Her points of anchorage then lie in the male characters that have shaped her narrative, and the breaking away from those signifying points then complicates Harley Quinn's identity as a supervillain. The actantial role then shifts from that of the monstrous feminine to that of the jester figure, upon analysing her through the theoretical lens of the Female Gothic. These gender relations and their implications will be further discussed in each of the supervillains' main chapters.

The study of these three supervillains as actants in their own narrative texts provides an understanding of the functions that such actants carry out in their respective texts. By choosing texts where the supervillain of the story takes the dominant actantial role, wherein either they perform most functions or where most functions are carried out in unanimity with this actant, a broader understanding of how the supervillain manages to create a sense of mystery is explored. Each supervillain's origins, in both comic book format and the film adaptations, are explored to trace their specific defining traits and understand how each adaptation has led the supervillains themselves to evolve.

It is taken for granted in comic books that actants change and grow, while films have explored this method of character growth through flashbacks or exposition dumps,⁴⁰ and by showing a marked difference in characters from the start of the film to the end. The role these

³⁹ Supervillains in comics have been time and again characterised either by demonstrating an exaggerated masculinity or a transgressive gender-bending identity, both of which stand in opposition to the superhero's normative masculinity or femininity (Rosenkranz 41; Putnam 157). This over-exaggerated display of gender identities has served to signify as a further mark of villainy (Baker 81; Li-Vollmer and La Pointe 90).

⁴⁰ Exposition is defined as 'the initial plot layout of a film revealed within the first ten minutes as a psychological or emotional "hook" to dramatically enroll the attention of the audience' (Rizzo). When long sections of a scene are dedicated to the conveying of such information, the term 'exposition dump' is commonly used, derogatorily.

three characters and their film representations have in this tradition of character growth proves to be another point of fascination for this study. *Joker* takes for granted audiences' familiarity with the mythos of the Joker and attempts to introduce a new world where he manages to succeed. Thanos's filmic storyline and major motivation might have differed from his comic origins, but his brutal drive to obtain the Infinity Gems and the desire to remove half of all living creatures are carried on. Harley Quinn in film is presented in a similar role as her comic counterpart without much deviation. Each chapter thereby explores what facets of each actant's villainy, that is, the functions they are popularly associated with, are carried on through their various adaptations, thereby further cementing their status as mobile signifiers capable of retaining their signified in a new media.

Superhero narratives are not the only ones that have dealt with the supervillain on such a personal level. In film alone, genres like action thrillers, spy thrillers, detective films and even animated films all have multiple well-known examples to substantiate the everlasting presence of Gothic elements in present-day storytelling. This thesis focuses on superhero narratives primarily because of the lasting histories these characters have had, but also to understand the melding of two specific genres: the superhero story and the Gothic narrative. Introducing new genres could dilute the importance that this thesis intends to place on their unique generic structure. The action film genre, which has adopted many traits from the superhero narrative, has been extensively analysed by scholars, Brown (*Dangerous Curves* 2011) and Tasker (*Spectacular Bodies* 1993) being two examples among many. The focus of this thesis on the superhero narrative, its subsequent films and comparison to the Gothic narrative opens the door for other scholars to undertake similar studies in related genres.

An important aspect (or at least an exceedingly interesting one that multiple scholars have focused on (Morton 17; Burke *The Comic Book Film Adaptation: Exploring Modern Hollywood's Leading Genre*; Gordon *Superman*; Pearson and Uricchio *The Many Lives of*

Batman; Meehan 1991) of the superhero genre of films is the industrial and economic aspect of producing these films. This thesis could have focused primarily on the industrial side of the superhero film, understanding why this moment in time made it possible for supervillains to be at the forefront of the superhero film. The choice to create a cinematic universe depended on multiple factors for Marvel Entertainment, and a major one was the financial ability to produce their own films. At the time, they were just coming out of bankruptcy, and the success of their first few films (*Blade* franchise, *X-Men* franchise and *Spider-Man* franchise) all helped Marvel form its own studio to produce its own films. Concurrently, by 2008, the technology to produce such films became much more advanced. However, as mentioned earlier, this thesis is most interested in the narrative of the superhero film, and how the villain becomes central to the narrative of the film.

Chapter 1 – Thanos as the Early Gothic Villain

Introduction: Establishing the Gothic in Thanos's Narrative

The first of the three villains that this thesis will focus on is Thanos, an alien giant from the planet Titan whose sole mission is to achieve the mantle of God. He uses benevolent reasons to obtain this power, but eventually this power ends up being too much for him to handle. His introduction to the comics was in 1973 by writer/artist Jim Starlin, who was inspired to create Thanos in a psychology class (Starlin, Interview by Daniel Best). Most of Thanos's storylines would feature an intense desire to gain power, to obtain powerful objects and become God. His first storyline follows his quest to obtain the Cosmic Cube, and the second – the one that was adapted into film – was his quest for the Infinity Gems. Though his intentions for obtaining such power were shifted to the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), the relentless drive to achieve such power remained the same. What was introduced to the MCU about Thanos was his omniscient presence and his ability to control events from behind a curtain.

These narrative traits that have been ascribed to Thanos in the MCU have a historical basis that stems from late-eighteenth-century Gothic novels. These novels were intentionally graphic in their exaggerated portrayal of evil, either through the terrifying environs that constantly surrounded the protagonist or personified in the villain (Punter, *The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 9). Thanos embodies both these aspects of evil in his appearances across the first three phases of the MCU. He is the hidden evil that haunts the Avengers for years, until *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) when he finally announces his presence and his mission. Of the eighteen films that were released as a part of the MCU prior to *Infinity War*, Thanos had brief appearances in only three of those. He was relegated to minor appearances and mere glimpses in the end credit scenes of those three films. These hints of Thanos's presence, hints of what he had planned and clues of what he might be up to are presented to audiences in the films

leading up to *Infinity War* – mirroring a trend commonly found in Victorian Gothic and detective novels.

Reading Thanos through the framework of Gothic literature allows for an in-depth understanding of a relatively simplistic comic book supervillain. The superhero narrative abounds with supervillains; each superhero has multiple recurring arch nemeses whom they are required to encounter on an almost cyclical basis. By undertaking such a study of this specific supervillain, this chapter aims to analyse the narrative elements utilised by the films in the MCU to assert Thanos's importance. As this chapter will surmise, the recurring glimpses of Thanos's machinations afforded to the films' spectators allow for Thanos to be read in parallel to Gothic villains. Aided with this line of thinking is the utilitarian reasoning that Thanos brings to the film with his line of villainy, presenting himself as not just physically capable, but also able to reason with the brightest minds on Earth and win. Released at a time when multiple blockbuster projects based on superhero narratives had proved successful among audiences and critics alike, *Infinity War* provides a counter to what occurs in most superhero narratives. That good will win over evil is taken for granted in many popular superhero narratives, and this film takes that assumption for granted. In presenting Thanos as the protagonist, and the one who wins, the film brings multiple ethical and narrative questions to mind that are explored and answered over the course of this chapter.

As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, the sensation novels that made up a majority of the Victorian Gothic and detective stories of the time intensely focused on the darker aspects of society. Evil in these stories was hidden for the most part, revealed in hints for audiences to uncover with the protagonist. Such narrative elements eventually became a convenience for authors to expose at the end that, all along, it was the work of the master criminal. The master criminal, Knight found, was a source of inspiration for writers like Arthur Conan Doyle, who used the device of the master criminal and created a character powerful

enough to destroy his protagonist, Sherlock Holmes (Knight 59). Once Moriarty gained immense popularity, other similar master criminals would emerge, two of the more relevant ones being Fu Manchu and Ernst Blofeld. As explained in the Introduction, texts such as *The Woman in White* and *East Lynne*, though slightly more of the Gothic and sensational variety, and not detective novels, provided a template for the possibilities that this master criminal could achieve (Knight 59).

At this point, it becomes essential to define some terms and examine why ‘master criminal’ is one that suits Thanos’s mode of villainy. As explained in the previous paragraph, Thanos’s first few appearances mirror that of the master criminal; this term suits the method of Thanos’s villainy and the narrative function that Thanos performs in those first three appearances – that of the antagonist. However, as this thesis will further explore, particularly in the text *Infinity War*, the term of ‘master criminal’ becomes almost redundant. This thesis finds new methods to understand Thanos’s villainy by focusing on the functions he performs, and the multiple types of villainy displayed by the Mad Titan in *Infinity War*. In the introduction, Thanos is referred to as a Gothic villain with traits of the Demonic. Most Gothic villains have Demonic traits, such as ‘frequent rhetorical associations with darkness ... , chaos and destructive desires’ (Stoddart, ‘The Demonic’ 117). Particularly early Gothic texts, such as *Paradise Lost* in which Satan is the villainous protagonist (sometimes classified as the hero-villain, a term that will be examined later in this chapter), explored ideas of a figure who was ‘proudly eminent / Stood like a tower; his form had not yet lost / All her original brightness’ (Milton 34).

These ideas are carried through to the Victorian Gothic, although explored more in man’s dual nature, such as in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), wherein evil is displaced from one half of man to the other. Even in cases of narratives with a monstrous other, such as a vampire, the site of conflict lies within the dual nature of the vampire’s victims,

with the human body itself becoming a site for the Demonic (Stoddart, 'The Demonic' 118). This definition does not necessarily align with Thanos's appearance in *Infinity War*, although a closer look at the figure of Dracula could show some insight into his villainy. For Baldick and Mighall, the threat/appeal presented by Dracula lies more 'in what he is not – "Victorian"' (281). Dracula is read as a heroic subverter of Victorian values (Baldick and Mighall 218),⁴¹ representing what Carter calls 'otherness' itself (Carter 131). Such heroic readings could be applied to Thanos as well – he presents a solution to an existing problem, that of climate change, that the upholders of the status quo (the superheroes) do not agree with, but neither do they offer any other solution. Thanos thus could be read as being the heroic subverter of American values established by Marvel's superhero narrative and then be classified as an anti-hero.

In Gothic literature, the figure of the hero-villain is quite popular, ranging from Milton's Satan to Brontë's Heathcliff embodying these characteristics. Described as bearing the markers of both victim and villain, the hero-villain presents a 'pleasing and majestic figure' but is moodily taciturn and violently explosive (Stoddart, 'Hero-Villain' 177). For McEvoy, this is the 'sublime villain', with characters like Manfred, Montoni, Schedoni and Vathek all embodying the charismatic evil characteristic of Early Gothic (24). As this chapter explores, multiple elements and typologies that have applied to the villains of Gothic novels apply to Thanos as well, showcasing multiple ways in which he represents an amalgamation of the Gothic villain. Thanos is first introduced as the master criminal figure, and deeper exploration of the character reveals more ways of attaching meaning to the Mad Titan.

The power that the master criminals were after, the methods they used to gain such power and the air of mystery that surrounded their narratives come quite close to Thanos's

⁴¹ Baldick and Mighall expand on this concept further, quoting Arata when discussing how Gothic criticism explores the 'collective anxieties of the bourgeoisie', and signalling the uses of Dracula as a tool to explore such themes, and more (280-281).

narrative arc in the MCU. This parallel between the hidden presence of the Gothic villains and Thanos's own introduction to the MCU is how the connection between the two begins. Thanos's presence in the eighteen films that make up the first three phases of the MCU leading up to *Infinity War* is studied and analysed in this chapter. By understanding his place in the narrative of those films and the hints that are dropped for audiences to pick up, this chapter examines Thanos as a master criminal figure. Though he makes brief appearances in only three films – one of which could be termed an extended cameo – the events that take place in the Avengers' world occur mostly due to Thanos's machinations. Across the superheroes' lives, important artifacts appear which, as it becomes clear later, are the objects of Thanos's desires. Thus, it is important to study the various connecting narrative threads across the first three phases of the MCU, leading up to *Infinity War*.

Infinity War is analysed on its own in a separate section in this thesis, as it is the first time we truly meet Thanos. Though the previous films have narratively ensured that audiences are aware of Thanos as an oncoming threat, his reasons and true goals are not revealed until this film. The superheroes meet Thanos for the first time in *Infinity War*, and the narrative finally reveals the true extent of his power, the objects he seeks and the lengths to which he would go to achieve his goals. His presentation in this film embodies that of a classic Gothic villain, which becomes evident when considering the descriptions and motives of Gothic villains such as Schedoni and Count Fosco. When introduced in *The Italian*, Father Schedoni already inspires suspicion with his unknown origins and a concerted effort to 'throw an impenetrable veil over his origin' (Radcliffe *The Italian*, 78), reminiscent of Thanos' mysterious appearances over multiple MCU films. At the same time, Thanos is shown to be admired by other entities, such as The Other in *The Avengers* (2012) and Ronan and Korath in *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), each of whom treat Thanos and describe him as 'the most powerful being in the Universe'. Similarly, Count Fosco is admired, in secret, by Marian

Halcombe, who describes him as ‘a man who could tame anything’, admitting that ‘the man has interested me, forced me to like him’ (Collins 176).

Thanos embodies these characteristics in his film, *Infinity War*, and the narrative of this film – though in the title is attributed to the Avengers, it is in reality about him – amplifies these aspects of his villainy. Superhero films are known for their formulaic narrative structure (Brown, *The Modern Superhero in Film and Television* 9) and the ‘maintenance of the status quo’ (Reynolds 51). Marvel Studios had earned back their profits by telling the origin stories of their most popular comic characters. The late 1990s and early 2000s saw origin films made for characters like Blade, the X-Men, Daredevil, the Hulk, Spider-Man and the Fantastic Four – all high-selling comic characters. The MCU also followed this trend for telling origin stories, but their connecting narrative arc set it apart (Brinker 208). Every film being released had the possibility to provide one more clue (in the form of Infinity Gems and the existence of a larger universe than that of the contained narrative of that specific narrative) to uncovering the mystery of Thanos. His eventual emergence in *Infinity War* set it apart from all the films the MCU had released thus far for being one where the supervillain becomes narratively important in comparison to the superheroes, by managing to overpower the heroes and accomplish his goal.

It is this core aspect of Thanos’s villainy that enables his study as a mobile signifier, embodying the idea of an evil God. Starlin mentions this being a source of inspiration when creating the character, but the idea of evil deities existed long before Thanos (Starlin, “Interview with Jim Starlin, Legendary Comic Artist Who Creates Thanos.”). However, a major portion of his narrative, mainly in the comic books, follows him seeking the position of such a deity, so that he may be at the same level of power as his love, Mistress Death. The films do not indulge in this storyline for reasons that will be discussed later, but the relationship is instead transferred onto his daughter, Gamora. Forming one of the points of anchorage,

Thanos's gender makes one of the connections between the comic books and the films where, instead of an unrequited love, it becomes a corrupted familial love. The core characteristics of Thanos, of 'extraordinary strength, and a natural and aristocratic superiority' with 'a dimension of introspection', are activated when adapting this supervillain into the MCU (Punter, *The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 69). Punter uses these traits to describe Father Schedoni in Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1797). For McEvoy, this figure constitutes the category of the 'sublime villain', 'figured of awe, imperious, a law unto themselves, a danger to young females (and males) around them, outfacing the supernatural with dangerously flashing eyes' (24), all terms that can be used to describe Thanos in *Infinity War*. Thus, these core characteristics that have adapted and shifted through time and genre make Thanos apt for study as a mobile signifier.

The analysis begins with a brief introduction of Thanos as he is presented in the comic books. His narrative arc over the span of two major storylines is of interest to this thesis, as it was these storylines that were adapted into film. The Cosmic Cube storyline covers Thanos's introduction to the world and his intense drive for power. The Infinity storyline homes in on his desire to obtain power, looking deeper into Thanos's motives and the tactics he uses. This brief introduction would serve as a mode to contrast it against the film adaptation and thereby understand which aspects of Thanos's villainy are detailed. Shifting gears, the emergence of the MCU and the importance of an overarching narrative will be discussed, as the institutional strategies taken up by Marvel Entertainment were essential for ensuring such storylines could be adapted for the screen. The story of Marvel's re-emergence into popular culture is one that has been told in more detail by multiple scholars, hence this chapter will draw on those secondary sources heavily to examine how the industrial changes made such films and such bold narrative choices possible.

The chapter then examines the various connecting threads across the first three phases of the MCU. While S.H.I.E.L.D was a connecting tissue for the first few films, Thanos and his

plan became an important element of these films quite early on. This section would examine all these connecting plot points and analyse how they point to Thanos's presence in the MCU as a master criminal. The presence of the master criminal is quite prevalent in popular culture, as scholars like Poore (20) and Cohen (7) have found. Such villains' predilection to hide in the shadows of their respective narratives to eventually show up and test the protagonist's endurance was an important part of their appeal to their respective narratives (Poore 34). Thanos proves to be of interest to this line of thought, as not only does he follow in the footsteps of these master criminals, he also boldly steps out of the shadows without losing the threat that his villainy demands.

Finally, the chapter's main analysis takes Thanos's narrative arc in *Infinity War* into consideration, which places him as the protagonist of that film. This is accomplished by Thanos's positioning as the subject, sender and receiver in A. J. Greimas's actantial model. For Greimas, the subject is the one who carries out the action – striving for a specific object, the sender is the one who inspires the quest, and the receiver is the one who benefits from this quest. By embodying these three main actantial roles, Thanos's position in the narrative is that of one who initiates action; other functions are performed as responses to the preliminary action that Thanos has taken. The film is still focalized through the superheroes that spectators have identified with over the previous eighteen films in the MCU, with the superhero's fears about Thanos combined with the awe inspired by the Black Order (Thanos' henchmen), particularly in the opening scene of the film. Yet the narrative remains firmly his, as the superheroes are merely reacting to the events set forth by Thanos. The film thus functions with multiple levels of focalization (Genette 189). Spectators are guided to experience the impact Thanos's actions make, and are led to unravel the supervillain and his motivations. As this chapter examines, Thanos is central to the narrative of *Infinity War* in ways that have been explored by Gothic literature.

Infinity War is the culmination of the films that had been released thus far in the MCU, and also the culmination of Thanos's arc. His position as the supervillain in this narrative mirrors that of Gothic villains, which this chapter details out in subsections, each focusing on specific aspects of his villainy. *Infinity War*'s unique position lies in the fact that, though a majority of the film is focalized through the superheroes who encounter Thanos, the primary actant in the film is the Mad Titan himself. As discussed before, he initiates a majority of the events in the film, and the superheroes merely react to his machinations. While that in itself is not unique to the superhero narrative, Thanos's success displays a shift in power structure. By the end of the film, the superheroes are immobilised by their defeat, mirroring spectators in the shift that the film takes from superhero conventions.

Each of the subsections in the chapter aims to analyse *Infinity War* and connect it to the Gothic tradition. The parallels that are drawn between Thanos's portrayal and Gothic villains are considered to be intentional by this researcher – Thanos is found to be the most straightforward of supervillains this thesis studies. As *Infinity War* dives into Thanos's tale, the narrative focus expands from Thanos's mission to his behaviour towards his family. His 'straightforward' villainy is then complicated, as discussed later in the chapter. Finally, as is the case with any supervillain, Thanos's heroic contemporaries reveal more about his true nature and mode of operating – comparing his long-standing villainy to Tony Stark (Iron Man)'s road to heroism echoes the relationship that villains from detective thrillers enjoyed with their heroic counterparts.

As this chapter finds, the Gothic is deeply entrenched in the narrative of the MCU, as well as the narrative of Thanos. By exploring and connecting the various parallels between the two genres, this chapter cements Thanos, and his brand of supervillainy, as (he calls himself) 'inevitable'.

Thanos in the Comics: Core Characteristics and Defining Storylines

Thanos was first introduced in Marvel Comics in ‘The Invincible Iron Man #55’ (cover date 1973). Introduced by writer/artist Jim Starlin, Thanos’s character and his main motivation was inspired by the Freudian principles of Eros and Thanatos, that is, the life drive and the death drive (‘Thanos’).⁴² Thanos is supposed to represent the death drive, of being driven towards death and destruction, for whom ‘the aim of all life is death’ (Ackerman, Zeavin, Hook, Lichtenstein and Goldblatt, 669). Freud believed that people channel this death drive outwards – by showing aggression towards others; or inwards – by showing aggression towards oneself (Freud 38, 44). Starlin also drew inspiration from the character design of DC Comics’ Darkseid when sketching out Thanos, and the intent was to make Thanos seem larger than life (Cronin). Starlin says that ‘right from the beginning, Thanos was the sort of guy who was going to do all the terrible things I wouldn’t allow myself to do. He was driven completely by his own desires’ (Franich). Further, Starlin mentions that he was inspired for Thanos’s constant success by his Catholic upbringing, that he ‘wanted the bad guy to become God’ (Franich). These characteristics are quite apparent in Thanos’s representation and are refined across two prominent storylines, the Cosmic Cube storyline, and the Infinity storyline.

Thanos’s introduction in ‘The Invincible Iron Man #55’ began the storyline of the Cosmic Cube that continued through ‘Captain Marvel #25-33’ (1973–1974). Thanos is an Eternal-Deviant born on the satellite of Saturn called Titan. Born to Mentor (also known as Alars) and Sui-San, Thanos and his brother were essentially the Princes of Titan. Mentor ruled over Titan in peace and harmony, but Thanos wanted to usurp this power from Mentor by ‘creating weapons on a world that had none’ (Starlin ‘The Invincible Iron Man #55’). Thanos was then exiled from Titan, and had since vowed vengeance and kept trying to claim his seat on the throne of Titan. This is the back story of Thanos’s life before his character arc in the

⁴² Thanos was introduced in the comics the same time as his brother Eros. Eros is known for being a fun-loving, carefree womaniser in the Marvel Universe – Starlin’s inspiration for the two brothers was quite clear.

comics begins. He spends most of his time trying to obtain the Cosmic Cube, described to be ‘an all-powerful Aladdin’s Lamp! Anything I wish ... becomes reality!’ (Starlin ‘Captain Marvel #31’). The serial nature of the comic book format allows for easy comparison with much of the Victorian Gothic material and each appearance of Thanos in the comic books spanning his introductory arc until his solo comic book series in ‘Thanos Quest’.

Though initially introduced to be after the throne he feels is rightfully his, more details about Thanos are uncovered and, eventually, he reveals his true intentions to be gaining the favour of his love, Mistress Death.⁴³ He continues on his quest to obtain power in his next major storyline, one where he is recruited by Mistress Death. She tells Thanos (through an intermediary: she never actually talks to Thanos) that an imbalance exists in the universe which, if left unchecked, could lead to peril. Thanos immediately accepts the job, willing to destroy planets and stars for the sake of his love (Starlin ‘Silver Surfer #34’). It is revealed to him that to solve this problem for his Mistress, he must obtain the six Infinity Gems and kill 50 per cent of all living beings across the universe. ‘The Thanos Quest #1 and #2’ follow him on his mission to obtain the Infinity Gems to prove his worth to Mistress Death, hoping to be her equal and her lover. He is constantly rejected by her, however, which slowly makes him go mad but also allows him to reach a self-proclaimed mantle of God. The Avengers eventually outwit him, and Thanos goes into seclusion.

At first glance, Thanos would quite easily fit into the Gothic archetype of the seeker of forbidden knowledge. This seeker, sometimes referred to as the alchemist, looks for the ultimate forbidden knowledge – knowledge that is not to do with the aspiration towards the divine, but rather symbolises entering into a society of immortals who exert influence over the destiny of the world (Punter, *The Literature of Terror Vol I*, 150). This knowledge, an aspect

⁴³ Mistress Death is the personification of death in the Marvel Universe, and Thanos is famously known for being utterly devoted to her, though she mostly pays him no heed (as depicted in Starlin, *Infinity Gauntlet*, and Starlin, *Thanos Quest*).

of Gothic writing that was reimagined and employed by Romantics like Coleridge, is the ‘knowledge of eternal life, the philosopher’s stone, those kinds of knowledge which will make men gods’ (Punter, *The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 105). Punter further finds that graveyard poets like Shelley would seek this knowledge through the study of death – which Thanos admittedly has an unrequited relationship with (*The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 105). Poore also finds that comic book supervillains ‘bent on world domination’ find roots in the mad scientist archetype, one that arguably stems from the seeker of forbidden knowledge – for example, Victor Frankenstein’s obsession with forbidden knowledge led to his madness (21; Punter, *The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 105).

An important aspect of this seeker is that they never truly attain the knowledge they seek, or that once they do, as Prometheus and Frankenstein did, they must then bear the curse that possessing such knowledge incurs.⁴⁴ Similarly, Thanos is able to obtain both the Cosmic Cube and the Infinity Gems in each of his narrative arcs; he even reaches the state of omnipotence he set out to achieve, but the power makes him mad. He loses sight of the Cube in his quest to be one with the universe itself, thus one of the superheroes (Captain Marvel) quickly destroys the Cube – thereby destroying any power Thanos held. Similarly, in the Infinity storyline, once he has collected the six Infinity Gems, he turns to Mistress Death for some hint of returned affection; she, in turn, only continues to reject him. Driven mad with rage, he fights various cosmic beings by becoming one with the power of the Gems, loses sight of the Gauntlet that holds the Gems and consequently loses all his power.

Overall, Thanos’s character through these first two storylines proves his moniker of being the Mad Titan. He is mad for power, madly in ‘love’ and is also quite easily driven to

⁴⁴ Punter analyses this idea in detail in *The Literature of Terror Vol 1* (106). He also notes how the relation between Faust’s search of immortal life, Frankenstein’s creation of the Monster and Prometheus’s desire for unbidden knowledge are situations that cannot be easily grouped together. Particularly in the case of Frankenstein, it was the Monster that was punished, not Frankenstein (Punter, *The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 106). Similarly, though Mistress Death does resurrect Thanos to collect the Gems, it is Thanos who must pay the price for having obtained the gems.

madness. He is quite a straightforward comic book villain, and though he has featured in storylines after the Infinity Gauntlet, they featured a slightly changed Thanos, one who was no more as enamoured by Death and also one who was much more of an analyst. He became more calculated, more patient to carry out evil plans and still very much aware of the burden that unlimited power possesses. When adapting Thanos for the MCU, an amalgam of these various traits was used to characterise the Mad Titan. As the following section will delineate, Thanos's multiple appearances in film gave the writers opportunities to try out various versions of Thanos in small bits and pieces, until he is fully revealed in *Infinity War*.

The MCU and Thanos: Establishing a Cinematic Universe

MCU was established in phases – it began in 2008 with *Iron Man*. Marvel had ventured into filmic representations of their characters much before this, with films and television shows featuring their best-selling comic superheroes like Spider-Man, Hulk, Captain America and Blade, to name a few. The formation of this cinematic universe, however, arose as a survival strategy for Marvel to recover from bankruptcy. Upon realising that they had the ability to sell their major assets – the intellectual property of the superhero itself – they became deeply committed to film production, believing it to be ‘the best way to promote superheroes’ (Johnson 66; Raviv 8). Marvel Entertainment Group, headed by Avi Arad and Isaac ‘Ike’ Perlmutter, merged with the thriving action figure business Toy Biz in 1998, one of the first steps they took after having filed for bankruptcy (Raviv 242). Having earned back profits from licensing their superhero properties to other production houses like Paramount, Sony and 20th Century Fox, particularly after the success of *Blade* (1998), *X-Men* (2000) – and to a smaller extent, even non-successful films like *Punisher* (2004) and *Daredevil* (2003) – Marvel was in a good place to set out on a new venture in an area that had previously brought them profits – film and television (Morton 60; Flanagan et al. 28).

The economic decision allowed for Marvel's real superpower to emerge, riding on the strength of the characters that the comic book writers had originally created. Marvel was now also far more actively involved in the process of jump-starting the productions, commissioning scripts and talking to directors (Flanagan et al. 28). Marvel Entertainment was bought out by The Walt Disney Company in 2009, and then Marvel formed its own studio to have all its products under one umbrella production house (Flanagan et al. 19-21). These important decisions played a major role in Marvel's ability to have full control and create any storyline that suited their vision. And with this ability to create their own stories, Marvel went with a method of storytelling that had served them well in the comic books: that of a shared universe.⁴⁵ Instead of having each film be a unit on its own, their films would connect through characters, organisations and major story threads.

The Marvel brand already had experience in creating such a shared universe, as their comic books would frequently feature characters from different storylines joining forces to defeat a villain. As Howe finds when viewing the fully formed Marvel Universe, '[e]ven where comic arcs have featured characters originally established in other corners of fiction, the saga as a whole makes up a distinctive and fully realised fictional universe ...' (6). The merging with Disney only stressed upon this unique characteristic of the creation of this universe, with Disney's strategy of a 'self-contained universe which presents consistently recognisable values through recurring characters and repetitive, familiar themes' blending easily into Marvel's already tried and tested strategy (Wasko 3).

The naturally serialised nature of comics was another strategy the cinematic universe would use to its advantage in getting audiences hooked. For one, these films would be designed to be 'tentpole' films – summer releases aimed primarily at a specific target audience, but

⁴⁵ Flanagan et al. note how the idea of a shared universe became important for Marvel comics during the Silver Age of the comic book. They find that 'Marvel became the first publisher of superhero fiction to have its characters coalesce into a *coordinated* 'universe'' (3, original emphasis, qtd from Wright 218).

flexible enough to accommodate other audiences as well (Fritz xix).⁴⁶ Secondly, serialised narratives adapted from comic books had already existed, beginning in the 1940s as B-movie serials, and in the 1960s–1970s as campy television (Hassler-Forest 407).⁴⁷ And as explained in the Introduction, serial narratives were immensely popular during the period of the late Victorian era, with the idea of suspense drawing in audiences towards the next issue. Tompkins finds, '[i]t is to the Gothic that we owe the entire apparatus of the novelistic suspense ... it is only to [Gothic writers] that the process of suspense and release was an essential fictional mechanism' (14).

Another interesting decision made by Marvel for their films was the directors they chose, though Morton finds this trend to have been an industry-wide one (61). The directors of the *X-Men* trilogy and *Spider-Man* trilogy (2002–2007), Bryan Singer and Sam Raimi respectively, had both come from backgrounds in independent filmmaking (Morton 61). When Marvel began their cinematic universe, Jon Favreau was at the helm of their first film, *Iron Man* (2008). He began his career behind the camera, as a writer on *Swingers* and the director of *Made* (2002). Jim Steranko, comic book writer/artist, has noted that the writers, directors and producers involved are 'real comic fans ... playing with material they grew up with and had a love for' (qtd. in Morton 61). Marvel has continued to hire such off-beat directors based in independent sectors while continuing to maintain their vision and having just enough control on the narrative crossing over into their films.

This trend of hiring off-beat directors reflects not only on the finished product of the film itself but also on the wider genre of the superhero narrative itself. As mentioned in the Introduction, the superhero narrative is a flexible one – that is able to adapt to and absorb different genres into its own (Jenkins, 'Just Men in Tights' 18). The tonal shifts in the first four

⁴⁶ As mentioned in the Introduction, multiple comic book films through the years have been critically lauded for being 'realistic', not 'let[ting] the silliness get out of control' and more (Jeffries 2).

⁴⁷ Gardner notes how serial narratives impacted audience reception in early cinema as well (56).

films of the MCU are quite evident, but even in the films pre-MCU, interesting generic decisions were made. *Spider-Man* (2002) was a blend of genres like horror/coming-of-age/superhero camp. More interesting for the focus of this study is *Blade*, which is essentially a vampire story. One of Marvel's first and most enduring filmmaking successes, it is a tale filled with Gothic characters, elements and narrative conventions – while maintaining a narratively straightforward superhero story. From modern-day stories of corporate take-overs to Shakespearean drama to Space Operatic comedies, MCU films have managed to dabble in these genres while still telling the conventional superhero story.

In each narrative, the end result remains the same, the restoration of the status quo finds superheroes' victory, though the steps taken to achieve this victory differ based on the superhero and, thereby, their personal journey to self-acceptance. Spider-Man gets to save the day from the evil Green Goblin, learn the importance of power and responsibility, while getting closer with his crush Mary Jane Watson. Thor, once he learns to value his powers, gains the knowledge of responsibility, usurps mischievous brother Loki from the throne and makes new friends on Earth. Though the genre fractals may differ, the underlying narrative remains the same (Flanagan et al. 88). Luca Somigli characterises serial comic book narratives as containing a 'sameness with difference' (289), and what Yockey identifies as '[t]he central dialectic between innovation and repetition' has been a part of Marvel's strategy across media (4).

As mentioned earlier, Thanos's introduction in the MCU was made through glimpses, as a sort of mystery to be solved. He is initially hidden in the shadows, the one who controls and orchestrates events that will lead him to his end goal. Through the release of films as a part of the MCU, clues and hints are dropped that lead the viewer to try to solve the mystery of what Thanos is after. He is first introduced six films into the MCU, which together constitute Phase 1. Once he is revealed to be the villain and audiences gain a sense of where the story

could be leading, narratives about the items that Thanos is after are brought to the films. These films together constitute Phases 2 and 3. By the end of Phase 3, Thanos is ready to emerge from the shadows and accomplish his task, which is also only revealed by the end of Phase 3. The following section will track Thanos's progress through the MCU.

Thanos in the MCU: The Master Criminal in the Superhero Narrative

Thanos's introduction was not made until six films into the MCU, though there were some important clues that would lead the keen-eyed viewer to realise his presence in the cinematic universe. As has been known of comic book films belonging to the superhero genre, stories from multiple comic books are merged together to adapt for the screen.⁴⁸ Although there was an artifact introduced four films into the creation of the MCU, there would have been no certainty of Thanos's presence within the narratives. Only upon his first appearance was there visual confirmation of him being the culmination to which the various MCU films were heading. This reveal performs similar functions as the ascription of the various crimes around London to Professor Moriarty, the master criminal. When first introduced by Holmes, Moriarty is described as such: "The man pervades London, and no one has heard of him" (Doyle "Adventure XI: The Final Problem", 283). Moriarty is introduced after he has already become "the malefactor, some deep organising power" that has been operating in Holmes' London (Doyle "Adventure XI: The Final Problem", 284). Here the parallels between the two modes, that of the Gothic and the superhero narrative, become more evident, as mentioned earlier. Victorian Gothic's serial nature and the comic book's own serial narratives were now revealed to have a part in building anticipation for Thanos's villainy, further cementing the Mad Titan's status as the master criminal scheming in the background.

⁴⁸ Brinker goes into detail about the various complications that are undertaken when adapting comic texts for an MCU film (212).

The first three films of the MCU, namely *Iron Man* (2008), *The Incredible Hulk* (2008) and *Iron Man 2* (2010) were essentially universe building films that also served to introduce the main protagonist of the first three phases of the MCU: Tony Stark. These first few films further served to introduce the espionage and security organisation called S.H.I.E.L.D that works to defend Earth from advanced technological, supernatural or extra-terrestrial threats ('S.H.I.E.L.D').⁴⁹ Additionally, the idea of the Avengers – Earth's Mightiest Heroes – was introduced early on in *Iron Man* and continued into its sequel. S.H.I.E.L.D plays an important role in *Thor* (2011), and while the film makes a few more important references to situate it firmly in the MCU,⁵⁰ it also introduces Loki – a character who would become the first pawn we are introduced to in Thanos's game.

Thor further features an important end-credit scene that introduces object that Thanos is after, and begins his manipulation of Loki. In the scene, S.H.I.E.L.D is in possession of the Cosmic Cube – though it is renamed as the Tesseract for the MCU – and Director Nick Fury offers scientist Dr Selvig an opportunity to study the Tesseract. It features next in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) as the main MacGuffin, when discovered by the antagonist of the film, the Red Skull, and essentially showing how it comes into the hands of S.H.I.E.L.D by the end of *Thor*. Though this film adds to the legend of the Tesseract and further proves it to be capable of great destruction, it does not do much more to connect the Tesseract to Thanos. That comes in the next film on Marvel's roster, a film that also features Thanos for the first time.

⁴⁹ S.H.I.E.L.D is not mentioned by name until the end of *Iron Man*, but carries through *The Incredible Hulk* – mostly through visual exposition; and *Iron Man 2* with the introduction of new agents from the organisation, including Natasha Romanoff – the Black Widow.

⁵⁰ Agent Coulson takes Jane's things, and Dr Selvig (Foster's friend) warns Jane not to mess with SHIELD, and mentions that a similar thing happened to 'a pioneer in gamma radiation', who audiences might recognise as alluding to Bruce Banner. Another agent of S.H.I.E.L.D is introduced, Clint Barton or Hawkeye, a popular character in the comics. Loki sends a machine-looking Destroyer to Earth to kill Thor, and when agents of S.H.I.E.L.D first encounter it, they wonder among themselves if this could be 'one of Stark's'.

The Avengers (2012) begins with a voice-over from The Other, a leader of the Chitauri (an alien species serving Thanos), who appears to be talking to a mysterious being seated on a floating throne. The Other speaks of the Tesseract awakening, on a ‘little ... human world that would wield its power’, and of their ally, shown to be Loki who receives a Sceptre encased with another Infinity Stone.⁵¹ Loki arrives on Earth through a portal opened by the Tesseract, steals the Tesseract and, with his Sceptre, enslaves Hawkeye and Selvig into doing his bidding. When the Avengers question Fury about the weapons and plans that S.H.I.E.L.D has hidden from them, Fury reveals that their organisation plans to use the Tesseract to develop weapons of mass destruction, similar to what HYDRA (a terrorist organisation) was doing. After the conflict ends, Thor takes the Tesseract and Loki back to Asgard.

A mid-credit scene features The Other talking once more to the back of the throne. This time, The Other laments the fact that their mission failed, that humans cannot be ruled and that ‘to challenge them is to court Death’.⁵² The visual then shifts to the person sitting on the throne, who turns, revealing himself to be the Mad Titan Thanos, facing the audience with a smile. This marks Thanos’s first appearance in the MCU, revealing him to be the one who plotted the events of this film. Except for the first scene and this mid-credit scene, Thanos’s presence is not felt at all – and yet events that occur were due to his orchestration. Such an introduction for the villainous character serves to highlight the importance of Thanos to the overarching narrative across the phases, and also specifically to this film, setting him up as the one to be on the watch for.

Phase 2 of the MCU contains more story-building, and establishes important places and objects, but also two appearances by Thanos. The Infinity storyline is picked up in *Thor: The Dark World* (2014), though Thanos does not make an appearance until a few films later. The

⁵¹ As the films are released and more information is revealed, it turns out that the Tesseract has held an Infinity Stone in it, and ends up being the Stone that brings the Vision to life in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*.

⁵² Along with the increasing numbers of Infinity Stones in this film, this line of dialogue serves as a major calling card for Thanos, since his comic counterpart is constantly courting Death.

Infinity Stones are hinted at when Odin tells the story of the Aether's origin, which is one of the Infinity Stones in a liquid form. The mid-credit scene in this film shows Sif and Volstagg⁵³ meeting with Taneleer Tivan⁵⁴ to give him the Aether. When asked why the Asgardians do not store it in their own vault, Volstagg replies that the Tesseract is already on Asgard, and that 'it is not wise to keep two Infinity Stones so close together'. This makes it the first time that the Infinity Stones are called by their name in the MCU. Loki's Sceptre from *The Avengers* makes an appearance in the end credit scene of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), revealed to be with HYDRA at this time and being used to experiment on the Maximoff Twins, who eventually become the Scarlet Witch and Quicksilver.

The world-building continues in *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), with Tivan explaining to the heroes and audiences what exactly the Infinity Stones are. But this film is also important in that it features an extended cameo of Thanos. Having picked up another pawn in Ronan the Accuser, Thanos's gameplan here is to use Ronan to obtain the Reality Stone with promises to destroy a planet in return. Though Ronan attempts to betray Thanos and keep the Stone for himself, the protagonists of the film manage to obtain the Stone and keep it away from either party. Thanos does not care much for the failures that Ronan is facing, assuring Ronan that if he does not follow through, he would 'bathe the starways in [Ronan's] blood!' He is still visualised as being in deep space, sitting on his floating throne, and mostly in the shadows. More information about Thanos is revealed through his family ties, as new characters Nebula and Gamora are introduced as his adopted daughters. It is a relationship that is expanded on in the forthcoming films, but Gamora very clearly no longer serves her father. Thanos is slowly stepping out of the shadows, however, and taking up more space narratively. The film

⁵³ Two of Thor's companions who frequently join him on adventures as Sif and the Warriors Three.

⁵⁴ Also known as The Collector, he is one of the oldest beings in the Marvel Universe. Within the MCU, he is known primarily for seeking objects and creatures of his interest and holding them in his ever-growing collection, as evidenced in *Guardians of the Galaxy*.

reveals another clue about what Thanos's end goal might be. However, in his next appearance, the Mad Titan reveals his motives to spectators.

Avengers: Age of Ultron (2015) was the second Avengers film, and while the film continues to add more important characters to the MCU – Scarlet Witch, Quicksilver and the Vision are all introduced and join the Avengers – it also expands on the potential power that one holding the Infinity Stones could possess. Thor sees in a dream vision and shares with his fellow Avengers the importance of multiple Infinity Stones, revealing that they are all pawns in someone's 'intricate game'. Most important, however, is the mid-credit scene where Thanos walks into a room full of light, wearing an Infinity Gauntlet and states, 'Fine, I'll do it myself.' This scene appears to be breaking the fourth wall, as Thanos looks straight into the camera when delivering this line. Within the narrative of the film, however, it may be understood that Thanos has been aware of the events that have occurred in this film, and having witnessed yet another villain (Ultron) fail to retrieve the Infinity Stones, talks to himself and thus wears the Infinity Gauntlet. This makes Thanos's third appearance in the MCU, and only now his true motivations are exposed. Thanos has been making moves and manipulating individuals to achieve the power that the Infinity Stones will grant him. Though his reasons and motivations are not yet revealed, it is clear that he is a powerful being with an end goal towards which our superheroes are minor inconveniences.

The films thus far in the MCU have served to introduce heroes, and hint at the major villains they will have to fight together. The next phase, Phase 3, continues to expand this world, introducing more heroes who would have a stake in the upcoming conflict with Thanos. More Infinity Stones are revealed in these films, but Thanos only appears at the end, in *Avengers: Infinity War*. As with the early Gothic novels, an air of mystery and fear surrounds Thanos throughout the MCU. He is rarely visually in full light and even when he is, his image only lasts a few seconds. He is supposed to represent the unknown, the horror of the unknown

and the master manipulator all in one. The consistent suspense of Thanos's plans, his ability to manipulate multiple villains and still emerge hidden from the superheroes mark him as a power of reckoning. This final section will analyse Thanos in his own film, *Infinity War*, and elaborate on his status as a classic Gothic supervillain.

Thanos in *Avengers: Infinity War*: Embodying the Early Gothic Villains

Avengers: Infinity War, directed by Anthony and Joe Russo, was released in theatres in 2018. The directors had previously worked on the second and third Captain America films, which served as a testimonial for their ability to manage multiple narrative threads spanning across multiple characters effectively. This film features many characters who have appeared in the MCU prior to this film, but the main protagonist of the film is evidently Thanos himself. As discussed earlier, the film positions Thanos as the main subject that the narrative follows. Thanos sends himself on a mission to collect the six Infinity Stones as a quest to ensure that 50 per cent of all living beings are eliminated, ensuring a better chance of long-lasting survival for all beings in the universe. While most of the narrative explores the villainy that Thanos enacts through the point of view of the superheroes (focalizing the film through their perspectives), Thanos remains the main focal point whose actions other actants in the film attempt to prevent. Thanos succeeds in his motivations, however, completing the quest he set for himself. Thanos's quest to collect the Stones – a narrative that has run through the eighteen MCU films released before this one – is completed in this film. Thanos obtains the Stones, defeats the Avengers and completes his mission to eradicate 50 per cent of the universe's population. In the following subsections, an analysis of Thanos's villainy in *Infinity War* will serve to delineate the ways in which he embodies the Gothic supervillain.

His Mission

Thanos's mission is to collect the six Infinity Stones, and to be the one that holds the power one would gain upon acquiring and employing them. The six Infinity Stones each control an essential aspect of being: Time, Reality, Space, Mind, Power and Soul, respectively. When in control of a Stone, the one with the power has the ability to manipulate the aspect that the Stone represents. For example, the display of Doctor Strange's machinations with the Time Stone in *Doctor Strange* (2016), make clear how time could be manipulated with the use of that Stone. The same applies to the rest of the Stones as well. If in control of all the Stones, and using them together, one would have the ability to shift and shape all the aspects that those Stones represent. With this power, Thanos aims to remove half of all living beings across the universe.

In his quest to collect the Stones, Thanos becomes an interpretation of the seeker of forbidden knowledge. The figure possesses a prominent presence in the Gothic mode, featuring famously in Shelley's *Frankenstein* through the eponymous character. Frankenstein's search of knowledge of life and death, and the creation of the first leads to his own inevitable destruction (Punter, *The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 105). As has been narrated in the previous MCU films, a being who has the power of the Stones must use them for the right reasons, for benevolent reasons. The films have displayed the power that these Stones have multiple times, and the superheroes always approach the Stones' power with a significant amount of fear, as the power of the Stones is beyond anything they have encountered. Various villains throughout the films attempt to use the Stones for their own misdeeds, but the superheroes eventually stop them. Thanos's quest for the Stones is one that ends in success. He seeks the ultimate forbidden knowledge – the knowledge of eternal life (not necessarily his own life, but the continuation of life across the universe in general). This is knowledge that has always been sought, but never fulfilled. It is the kind of knowledge that would 'make men gods' – which, as is known of Thanos, is a serious temptation (Punter, *The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 105).

Over the span of a few days, Thanos manages to locate and obtain all six Infinity Stones and eradicate half the population of the universe. His reasoning for doing so seems to come from a place of caring, quoting the mistakes that were made on his home planet as a justification for him to be the one to take such a drastic step. While in the original comic it is Thanos's blind love for Death that makes him achieve this power, in the film it is his unwavering belief that he is 'the only one with the will' to do so. The comic book storyline, which runs from *Silver Surfer* # 34 to *Infinity Gauntlet* #6 features Thanos on a mission to collect the six Infinity Gems and restore the 'cosmic imbalance' in the number of souls alive against those dead, all on Death's orders (*Infinity Gauntlet* #1). Thanos's motive for obtaining the Infinity Gems remains the same; however, in the comic books he is instructed by a power above him, by Mistress Death, to do her bidding. If Mistress Death were to be included in the film adaptation, the malevolence of Thanos's villainy could have waned, since at that point he would not function as the master criminal, but as a mere lackey. In *Infinity War*, Thanos is the final reckoning: there are no powers above him, guiding him through the process of achieving this power. Similar to Loki, who believes he is 'burdened with glorious purpose', Thanos has no doubt in this mission he has taken upon himself (*The Avengers*). His belief that he is the only one who can correct this problem mirrors the idea of the wanderer, a popular motif of Gothic fiction.

The wanderer as a Gothic symbol has some religious basis and was used by Gothic writers quite early on. In essence, the legend stems from the idea of a man who is doomed to a perpetual life on Earth as punishment for an ultimate crime against God (blasphemy or unbelief, generally) (Punter, *The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 100). This wanderer is characterised by perpetual tedium and weariness, but he is beyond fear now that he has defied God. He could be in possession of supernatural powers, and more often than not has the ability to see the future. As Punter confirms of the wanderer, his symbolism could range from 'the defeated aspirations of humanity towards perfection, to a dreadful warning of the consequences of

defiance' (*The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 100). Thanos mirrors these ideas in some interesting ways, especially considering the threat he represents in real life as a symbol for the environmental issues we face.

Thanos's mission to eradicate half of the living beings is a mission that he has undertaken for quite a while before the audience are introduced to him in *The Avengers*. Based on Gamora's recounting of how he discovered her, Thanos had been at this for quite some time already and was looking for more efficient ways to accomplish the task. He is beyond fear without the Stones (which is discussed further later), but with the Stones does not feel the need to wear his armour. He walks into battle with the awareness that he has reached a higher level of being, a fact proven with his ability to manipulate Reality and Time through acquiring the appropriate Stones that grant him such power. Further, he believes himself to be doomed with the foresight of his mission's fruition. Thanos believes his motives to be wrought out of kindness – to ensure that future generations avoid facing a slow and painful extinction, he does it in one quick snap. He calls it mercy, seeing himself as a benevolent God, the only one who knows a truth and has the will to make the tough decision and enforce it upon everyone.

The heroes who fight against him are upholders of the status quo, fighting him and his methods but never offering any alternate solutions to a real problem. The problems that Thanos lists out are real concerns – overpopulation and an ebbing of natural resources are issues that spectators in real life also have to find solutions for. And although Gamora and Dr Strange argue against his logic, stating that Thanos does not have the right to decide what is better or worse for the universe at large, he disagrees and is egotistical enough to believe that he is the only one in the universe who can. And upon accomplishing his goal, he keeps his word and retreats to a farming land and, watching the sun rise, believes the universe to be grateful to him.

His Family

Thanos's 'family' is introduced in *Guardians of the Galaxy*, as his adoptive daughters Gamora and Nebula become essential characters in the narrative of that film. 'Family' is placed in quotation marks because, while the two are technically his adoptees along with others who appear later on in *Infinity War*, Thanos is not familial. It is revealed in *Guardians* that Gamora and Nebula's relationship with their father is a strained one, at best. Gamora reveals to Peter Quill in dialogue how she was tortured and turned into a weapon by Thanos. She stresses that his role was never fatherly, that she was kidnapped from her own planet when Thanos killed 50 per cent of its population. Nebula's relationship with Thanos is more complex, as she continues to act on his behalf and carry out his instructions in this film. She is more machine than tissue at this point, and chooses to become a free agent by the end of the film. Though Gamora extends a sisterly hand, Nebula chooses to carve her own path.

The sisters and their relationship with Thanos is brought up once again in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* (2017). Nebula, now well known in the MCU and feared for being Thanos's daughter, is a bounty hunter who has given up her sadistic ways, stating that she could only afford the lifestyle 'when Daddy was paying the bills'. She recounts how Thanos would make her and Gamora fight each other, and when she lost, Thanos would replace a part of her body with machinery. These are events that provide backstory for her character and give an indication of her future motives, which mainly feature her intention to kill her father. The sisters mostly serve to confirm Thanos's evil, how it extends to the home front and how he is genuinely incapable of portraying a good example of fatherhood.

The psychological torture of the Gothic heroine is a well-discussed and analysed area of study,⁵⁵ and could also be extended to understand the torture that Gamora and Nebula undergo

⁵⁵ Michelle A. Masse examines these 'phantasmagoric horrors that bombard' the heroine of Gothic novels, identifying them as 'the price she must pay for her transgression-desire' (10). For example, in *The Italian*, it is Ellena who is kidnapped and subject to torture at the hands of Father Schedoni for initiating a romantic relationship with the protagonist Vivaldi (Radcliffe *The Italian*, 292-3).

under Thanos's manipulative care. After all, an essential aspect of the Gothic was the heroine, the vulnerable protagonist who was chased, imprisoned and had to suffer cruelty at the hands of the villain (Horner 180). Though she displayed courage in the face of such evil and attempts to escape the evil that haunts her, she is left to be forever changed by these events (Horner 180–183). The cruelty she faces could have been emotional, sexual or social – all of which both Gamora and Nebula have to struggle with. Thanos's presence as the Gothic villain in the face of this torture of his daughters is further cemented when *Infinity War* reveals first-hand just how he chose to torture them.

The route that the filmmakers chose to 'humanise' Thanos was by bringing to the forefront his relationship with Gamora. Thanos is visibly vulnerable around her; he becomes more relaxed when alone with her and reveals anguish over having to kill her. She admits early on to knowing how he functions, what his goals are and how long he has been working towards achieving them. She also forces her love interest, Peter Quill, to kill her rather than let her be captured by Thanos, as she holds information that she knows is essential for Thanos's victory. Upon encountering Thanos after making this promise, Gamora's first instinct is to kill him – an attempt that ends up being an illusion to trick and kidnap her. He takes her aboard his ship, showing a captured and tortured Nebula whom he will continue to torture unless Gamora gives him the information he wants. Later, when told that Thanos must lose a soul he loves to gain the Soul Stone, he cries – affected by the prospect of having to kill his daughter. Yet he kills her anyway, justifying his actions by telling her: 'I ignored my destiny once. I cannot do that again. Even for you'.

The films thus far have attempted to present this father-daughter relationship from as objective a framework as possible. Over the course of the two *Guardians* films, the narratives have explored Gamora and Nebula's fight to escape from their father's influence. Thanos's view of the relationship is not yet explored for the very obvious reason that his perspective is

the one of the villains’ – he is the abuser in this relationship. His method of abusing Nebula was more physical, literally replacing parts of her body to make her a ‘strong warrior’. With Gamora, the abuse is more on the mental and emotional side. Thanos trained Gamora, appreciated her when she successfully accomplished missions for him and openly admitted to her being his favourite. His positive approval of her throughout her growing years would have makes her ready to please him to the best of her abilities. It took years for Gamora to escape that abuse, and it took her finding a new family in the Guardians for her to understand what real love meant, in a way that Thanos did not understand.

As is evident from the events of *Infinity War*, Thanos truly believed his love for Gamora was honest and true. He saw himself as her father and valued their relationship very deeply. He understands her hatred for him, is willing to manipulate her emotions to get what he wants out of her, but still has some form of twisted love for her. He was proud of her, not for her accomplishments as an individual, but because she was exactly what he made her to be. Thanos continually lists things that he taught her and how the skills he gave her made Gamora the ‘fiercest woman in the galaxy’. However, upon realising that he would have to kill her, he feels sadness and pain. After succeeding in his mission and eradicating half of all life, he enters the Soulworld (a pocket dimension) finding a Gamora as a child waiting for him. He tells her that though he succeeded, the task cost him everything.

Apart from the abovementioned narrative elements, the film’s formal elements support this sympathetic perspective that Thanos displays toward himself in *Infinity War*. In scenes where Thanos faces other heroes such as Thor, Hulk, Doctor Strange, Iron Man, other Avengers and the Guardians, the mise-en-scène of shots featuring the Mad Titan emphasise his monstrous size in comparison to the heroes’ human sizes. Thanos is mostly framed within low-angle wide shots, as though to maintain the distance he perceives between himself and the heroes’ ideologies. The background score is consistently foreboding and threatening, a stark contrast

to the Avengers' theme that is heroic. However, in scenes with Gamora the composition shifts to close-up shots of Thanos' face. He visibly lowers himself to see her eye-to-eye in the Throne Room. On the planet Morag as well, where the duo heads to obtain the Soul Stone, upon learning that Thanos has to sacrifice his daughter, the shots featuring Thanos are all close-up shots – the narrative now seemingly allows for closeness with the Mad Titan. Later, when captured by the heroes on the planet Titan, the mise-en-scène returns to the traditional wide-shots until Thanos is asked about Gamora by the heroes, where his grief becomes known to them through another close-up shot. The music shifts in scenes with Gamora as well, becoming softer and mournful. Each of these formal elements serve to emphasise Thanos' status as a hero-villain, eliciting sympathy.

The film walks a fine line in dealing with this relationship. Thanos is the hero of this film; he is the protagonist that with whom narrative familiarity is established. His relationship with his daughters, Gamora especially, is an essential one in that it makes a wholly formed character out of Thanos. His inability to deter from the task he has set upon for himself is established early on, as he relates himself to being the physical manifestation of destiny itself in his first scene in *Infinity War*. This relationship with Gamora comes as a surprise; at least the depth of emotions he feels for her does. And though he is firmly in the wrong, the film still has to do justice to his emotions, dwelling in the uncomfortable truth that Thanos truly believed in the 'purity' of his love for Gamora after having killed her. It evokes that fine line that Gothic writers would have had to traverse when exploring the hero-villains of their time.

Helen Stoddart's brief introduction of this character reveals the Gothic hero-villain's contradictory nature. He bears the markings of a villain and victim, finding origins in Milton's Satan, the eighteenth-century 'man of feeling' and the Byronic Hero (Stoddart, 'The Hero-Villain' 176). These heroes were 'cursed by a rebellious impulse to test and transgress human social and ethical constraints', this curse from which stems the main ambivalence of this figure

(Stoddart, 'The Hero-Villain' 177). He is both violent and demonic, and at the same time an outsider in a stage of suffering. Botting elaborates that the hero-villain is rarely the cause of evil himself, instead 'he invites respect and understanding since real evil is identified with certain often aristocratic figures' (*Gothic* 178). We are asked to feel for Thanos's loss, expected to empathise with the loss he had to participate in for the sake of his 'destiny'. He presents his mission as being one that 'extracts a heavy toll', but stops at nothing to accomplish it – even killing his daughter in the process.

Romantic writers, influenced by Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, would toy with blurring the boundaries of virtue and vice, 'either in providing extreme presentations of virtue or in painting villainy in too appealing/attractive a manner' (Botting and Townsend 7). The sympathetic villain is another age-old trope, with Frankenstein and his monster being one of the more popular examples.⁵⁶ A common way to understand the villain of the Late Victorian Gothic novels was by the move away from the distinctly diabolic villainy to examining an evil that is distinctly human (Stoddart, 'The Demonic' 117). This shift towards internalisation and secularisation meant that demonic disturbances were now ascribed to human agency rather than the supernatural (Stoddart, 'The Demonic' 117). The influence of the Faustian myth, the publication of *Frankenstein* and the increasing interest in sciences like psychoanalysis worked together to shift the idea of evil – now providing in-depth analyses or new perspectives of evil and villainy (Stoddart, 'The Demonic' 117; Botting and Townsend 12).

Botting notes how the publishing of *Frankenstein* shifted the Gothic movement towards sympathy. He finds that,

... in the remakes of 'classic' Gothic novels and movies, greater sympathy and stronger identification is unapologetically evinced for

⁵⁶ Another example of a sympathetic villain can be found in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. Heathcliff's cruelty toward Cathy and Hareton is similar to the cruelty the Emily St Aubert faces at the hands of Montoni in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, in his 'haughtiness of command' (Radcliffe *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, 16), 'fierce temper, mercenary and unlawful plotting, and his quest for vengeance' (Botting *Gothic*, 123-124). However, Heathcliff and other Byronic heroes (Prometheus and Milton's Satan being sources of inspiration) are still 'regarded as heroes because of their resistance to over-powering tyranny' (Botting *Gothic*, 84).

figures once condemned as incarnations of evil. Though attraction of evil always lurked in the text, the movement towards sympathy ... underlies a major shift in perceptions of Gothic monstrosity from a horrifying sight ... to a recognition and embrace of the monster as the image, the inner, often denied aspect of who we ... truly are (*The Gothic* 3).

In the novel, scholars find Shelley's intention to show Frankenstein's errors while making the monster a strictly neutral being made evil by circumstances to be inherently contentious (Punter, *The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 106). Frankenstein has judged his creation poorly, and the monster has no other precedent to draw from than that of his creator. Further, Punter finds that Shelley refrains from judging the scientist too harshly as well – explaining his motives to be purely scientific, and yet 'unnatural' (*The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 108).

This is where the narrative of the film and Thanos's role as the film's narrative actant play a major part in establishing critical boundaries. The narrative allows for both contradictions to coexist, the knowledge that Thanos is a supervillain who is inherently evil, and a villain grieving after having killed a member of his family. Thanos's grief is not left unexplored; the scenes right after show him reacting emotionally when he is known for his stoicism. When captured by some Avengers, Mantis reads his emotions and reveals to the group that Thanos is in mourning.⁵⁷ Later, Thanos empathises with the Scarlet Witch's loss of having to kill the person she loves. And, as mentioned earlier, he meets Gamora as a child when he enters the Soulworld. As we are provided with all these details, a natural conclusion drawn is that Thanos's 'love' for Gamora was real for him. It becomes essential for spectators to then realise that his love was never pure – it was manipulative, abusive and evil.

By placing Thanos at the forefront of this narrative, making him the primary actant, the writers and directors were being intentional with the course that this film would take. In Poore's exploration of the Neo-Victorian villain, he finds evil to depend on distance, 'on being perceived as alien, abject, as not being fully seen or understood' (34). He continues, 'To give

⁵⁷ Mantis is an alien empath who has been a part of the Guardians of the Galaxy since *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol 2*. She has the ability to read and influence a person's emotions.

the villain a backstory ... is to humanise the villain but also to explain and understand, and therefore dissipate the aura of the villain' (34). And while Thanos in this film is more understood than he has been in previous appearances, it does nothing to diminish his status as the supervillain. He remains the embodiment of evil in this universe, the 'love' he has for his daughters is one crime among many that substantiate his villainous status.

His Heroic Counterparts

As essential as his own character is through the film, the true extent of Thanos's villainy is revealed in his heroic counterparts and his interactions with them. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, the true nature of a superhero's heroism is revealed in his supervillain – defeating his supervillain enforces the heroic aspects that are upheld as a part of the status quo. The film *Infinity War* plays around with the idea of heroism quite a bit, as Thanos is effectively the hero of this film. Both narratively and stylistically, the film displays Thanos's 'heroism', and though the narrative brings back well established, classically identifiable superheroes, their perspective is not central to this film. This film is all about Thanos, and the superheroes' reactions to Thanos.

Infinity War reveals itself to be a distinctly different film from the very beginning. Since *Doctor Strange*, Marvel Studios' title credit depicts a snapshot of the scenes from the previous films that together form the 'foundation' for the MCU, with the words 'Marvel Studios' appearing on screen after. The credits are generally accompanied by an uplifting, anticipatory score, typical of the adventure/superhero genre. In *Infinity War*, however, the credits for Marvel Studios are accompanied by dark, foreboding music with dialogue from a person asking for aid. The person reveals themselves to be on the Asgardian refugee ship, sending out a message to 'any vessel within range' because they are 'under assault'. The banner for Marvel Studios is then shown, but instead of the bright red background that usually accompanies the logo, the

background is black, with red colour used to highlight the number 10 that is spelled out of the word 'Studios', foreshadowing the dark and mournful story about to unfold.⁵⁸

As the film narrative begins, destruction of the Asgardians on board by Thanos's crew ensues. Ebony Maw, a member of the Black Order, declares to the surviving Asgardians that they should 'rejoice ... You have had the privilege of being saved by the great Titan. You may think it is suffering, no, it is salvation ... even in death, you have become children of Thanos.' This monologue is accompanied by visuals of bodies strewn around, the damage inflicted upon the ship and, towards the end, Thanos at centre stage with the light behind him. This first image of Thanos sets him up to be the main character of the film. Though not in full light yet, it is obvious from his placement, his armoured stance and from Maw's monologue what we should be expecting from Thanos. In a long pan shot, the camera moves from Maw's face to Loki's, who looks in fear, turning back to show Thanos, standing next to Thor's body lying on the ground.

While this entire sequence serves to introduce the audiences and the superheroes to the threat that Thanos represents, it also mimics the iconic introduction that some superheroes get in their own films. By the time that the superheroes are established in their respective universes, they are generally greeted by members of the public with enthusiasm, fanfare and faith in their ability to uphold the right side of the law. Thanos is greeted by his Black Order; Ebony Maw sings his praises and the framing and lighting of the scene all point to Thanos being the focal point of this film. The soundtrack accurately announces the dread that the superheroes face when encountering Thanos: there are no tricks on that count.

Thanos fights multiple superheroes in the film, facing them off individually and also in groups. He fights the Hulk in combat and defeats him, manages to seriously injure Thor, proves

⁵⁸ '10' is highlighted to celebrate the ten years that had passed since the formation of the successful Marvel Studios, with their first film *Iron Man* released in theatres in 2008.

to be an equal to Doctor Strange's mastery of the Mystic Arts and manages to subdue most of the Guardians of the Galaxy. The power he gains through obtaining the Stones puts him at an unfair advantage, though it is an advantage he makes full use of. But none provides a challenge big enough for him to deem an equal, until he fights Tony Stark/Iron Man. Stark's main powers are his Iron Man suit, which he built and designed to account for any possibility while on a mission in space. Beyond that, Stark is a character that has been narratively developed about as much as Thanos has not in the films spanning the MCU. While Thanos has been plotting and working from the shadows, Stark's struggles with being a superhero were the first we encountered when introduced to the MCU. And in *Infinity War*, it is Stark who earns Thanos's respect.

Both Stark and Thanos start from similar mindsets, being egotistical and self-centred megalomaniacs. Stark was a genius born into wealth, who was harshly reminded of the fact that the world did not revolve around him.⁵⁹ He constantly faces demons from his past, creations of his or his father's making. By fighting those demons, he realises that the things he truly values are the people who care for him. He has to learn through painful growth that having people to care for, to save and treasure is the most important thing. He is in fear of this love being taken away from him, strives to use his genius and his suits to create armour around all things precious to him, the entire world included. He questions his decisions, his actions and the repercussions that his actions have on the people around him. And by the time the narrative introduces Thanos in *Infinity War*, Iron Man is fully formed, prepared to meet the demon that has been haunting him since *The Avengers*.⁶⁰

Stark receives a narrative arc that had been seven films in the making, and only in *Infinity War* does he finally meet his equal. He recognises the importance of this encounter,

⁵⁹ In *Iron Man*, when kidnapped by terrorists Stark has a conversation with a fellow prisoner who inspires him to act against the terrorists, effectively putting him on the path towards superheroism.

⁶⁰ The film *Iron Man 3* follows Stark as he battles panic attacks that began as a result of the events in *The Avengers*; *Civil War* deals with Stark giving remunerations to events of *Age of Ultron* and so on.

understands what sort of threat Thanos presents and still chooses to fight Thanos on the latter's home base – taking the fight far away from the people he cares about. But when they first meet, Thanos is emotionally compromised – he has just had to kill his daughter – and upon arriving on Titan, realises that one of his soldiers, Maw, is also no more. Having been subdued by the Guardians and a few Avengers only angers Thanos further, which makes him fight with more anger than he has demonstrated thus far. Thanos recognises Stark just as they are about to fight, claiming to be 'cursed with knowledge'. He dismantles Iron Man's tech defences with ease, subdues Stark with only the power of the Stones and stabs Stark with his own weapon.

The fight between the two does not last long; it barely covers two minutes of screen time. But the narrative importance that this cinematic universe has placed upon Stark and Thanos makes this fight feel much more impactful. Stark's suits have all been built so that when the time came, he would be able to defeat the enemy that had been haunting him for years. When Thanos is revealed to be that enemy, he uses all his defences to defeat Thanos, implementing years of his work to ensure the Mad Titan's defeat. The fact that Thanos's victory over Stark happens so quickly could be a consequence of him using the power of the Stones – but this battle is more than a show of physical might. Both have finally met their match of wits, years of planning have led them here and only because of the undue advantage one holds over the other does the battle come to an abrupt halt. Strange hands over the Time Stone in a bargain for Stark's life.⁶¹

The film stands apart from previous MCU films, and a majority of superhero films in general, in the fact that the heroes lose in this film. A well-known trope of the superhero genre is that no matter how difficult the battle, the superhero is often able to overcome their foe, proving the power of good over evil. Most superhero films are made of self-contained plotlines,

⁶¹ Strange mentions in an earlier scene that the heroes stand one in 14 billion chances of defeating Thanos, and in the next film *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), it is revealed that Strange had to hand over the Stone, Thanos had to win in *Infinity War* for the Avengers to finally defeat Thanos once and for all in *Avengers: Endgame*.

and even if there are hidden Easter eggs for future projects as a part of the franchise, one major conflict is resolved by the end of the film. The superhero may still have other villains to fight, but has successfully defeated the villain of this storyline. The next villain would feature in the sequel, if the film proves successful enough to attract one. *Infinity War*, already a part of a mega-successful franchise, did not have the pressure to prove the superheroes' might or strength; it did not need to show how good always defeats evil. The films that came before *Infinity War* showed, time and time again, how good, whatever shape or form it took, always defeated evil (even reluctant good, as the *Guardians of the Galaxy* managed to keep the bad guys from afflicting too much damage). In *Infinity War*, however, the superheroes that audiences potentially identify with have few things that truly work in their favour. As Phillips notes, this displays a betrayal of trust that audiences had in the MCU. He states, 'The film repeatedly offers false moments of potential triumph and, in each instance, the audience's trust in the MCU's heroes and their abilities is undermined' (101).

The ability of the superheroes might have been questionable, but setting Thanos's status as the supervillain was what the film aimed to accomplish. He fulfils all the characteristics of a classic comic book supervillain, and the narrative arc that began in *The Avengers* is completed in this film, when Thanos succeeds, sits on his throne having let down his armour. The next film of the franchise, titled *Avengers: Endgame*, had to take up the narrative from a new angle, by introducing time travel and having the Avengers fight a completely different Thanos. But *Infinity War*'s Thanos succeeded in his mission, and in his success managed to become the supervillain that lives beyond his quest. The damage he has inflicted is long-lasting, the impact he has had on the superheroes is not minimised – even in the later MCU projects released since.

His Sense of Self

Infinity War is set up to be a film about Thanos from the very beginning, from the opening credits for Marvel Studios. Though there are still quite a few uplifting scenes, especially those

occasional few scenes that take place in Wakanda, the film has a sombre tone to it, an effect that is aided by the background score accompanying the film. Thanos is the hero of this film, and he accomplishes the goal he had set out to achieve. His similarity to the Greek God Thanatos (a character after whom he was named) is striking as he represents that which cannot be denied, the 'inevitable'; he represents death (Carpenter ch. 3).⁶² Todorov suggested that Death in Gothic could be handled in two different ways: either as a relief that comes after periods of uncertainty; or resulting in incredulity with the laws of reality left intact, and thus providing an explanation of the extraordinary phenomena (Bronfen 113).

Thanos presents himself as the answer, he claims to know the only solution to a problem that afflicts all, and to be the only one with the ability to solve the problem. When the heroes encounter Thanos, they attempt to reason with him. Gamora and Strange do so through dialogue, trying to convince him that such power does not belong to one individual, cannot belong to one individual. He disagrees, believes himself to be worthy of that power just by the sheer determination it took for him to gain this knowledge and carry out the mission. Any attack of his is on such a massive scale, any action he takes is otherworldly and is thus met with incredulity on behalf of the Avengers. They find it hard to grasp the limits of his power to effectively defeat him. By the end of the film, when half of all living creatures have been killed, all that the remaining living members can do is fall in shock. The two leaders of the Avengers, Stark and Rogers, fall to the ground after witnessing the people they care for turn to dust. Thanos is the cause and the explanation for this.

In some ways, Thanos embodies the sublime villain as defined by Emma McEvoy. She calls this character a 'figure of awe, imperious, a law unto themselves, a danger to young females (and males) around them, outfacing the supernatural with dangerously flashing eyes,

⁶² Thanatos in Greek mythology is read as 'death, and the personification of Death' (Tripp 555). This reading, along with Thanos' mission for a mass extinction allows for such a comparison.

in positions of power and acting from within the system' (24).⁶³ Thanos is a figure of awe – throughout the MCU, spectators watch multiple minions and other characters in awe of the power he possesses and the multiple references made to him as the most powerful in the universe. He is imperious, believing himself to be the saviour of the universe and removing any obstacles that block his path, essentially bulldozing his way to his goal. He is a danger to all; genders do not matter or faze him and neither do familial bonds. He placed himself in a position of power by recruiting various minions, adopting his 'children' and taking over planet after planet.

In some other ways, Thanos acts as the type of Gothic villain that populated the novels from 1790 onwards. Authors would 'demand empathy for the agonised villain who is now also a warped hero', and readers are asked to focus on this villain's passions and desires (McEvoy 24). S/he would be an outsider, not associated with institutionalised power, and has journeyed outside of normal society (McEvoy 24). Most relevant to our discussion, they 'diffuse all around them the curse that weighs upon their destiny' (McEvoy 24). Thanos does demand empathy, not just from the superheroes in universe but from spectators as well. The decision to make his motivation an environmental cause, an issue that is pertinent in our real world and that spectators still do not have conclusive answers to, was a strategic decision. And the worst part is that the superheroes never offer an alternative solution to solve the issue. Thanos is a warped hero, one who has found an issue with the universe and wants to solve it to ensure a better future for generations to come. As pointed out by Arp and Rivera, Thanos's ethical reasoning and self-perception point very strongly towards a utilitarian school of thought, which

⁶³ McAvoy here refers to protagonists of Romantic novels, who are 'living out a life that provokes our desire in many respects' (24). Such a narrative can be found earlier as well, in *The Monk* with Ambrosio embodying such characteristics. Upon being 'expose[d] to dangerous temptation' (Lewis 50), Ambrosio's journey 'outside ordinary society' (McAvoy 24) and exposure to The Devil, with the perspective favouring Ambrosio's narrative, make his narrative that of the sublime villain.

operates on the suggestion that one should act so the greatest good results for the greatest number of people ('A Seriously Mind Blowing Book').

As McEvoy mentions of the Gothic villains, we are asked to focus on Thanos's desires and passions over the course of the film. His character receives the most development, and a majority of the film's exposition is dedicated to introducing his character, thereby ensuring that the nuance and complexity of his desires and motives are at the centre of the film's plot. Thanos is an outsider, not just due to the fact that he is from a planet spectators have not previously been introduced to, but also because he sees himself as outside the norm. He has become reconciled to the idea that he is alone in his ability to carry out this task, a task he has taken upon himself as a burden. He believes himself to be different from others, better than others and thus has fitted himself into the category of the 'Other' while the rest of the universe remains the norm. But because of his imperious ways, he takes it upon himself to 'diffuse all around [him] the curse that weighs upon [his] destiny' (McEvoy 24). He spreads this knowledge that he has gained through fear and terror, but still allows other planets and worlds know what he aims to do. He boasts of the task he has undertaken to anyone who will listen, wanting all of his victims to know, through Maw, that their deaths are not meaningless and that they serve the greater purpose.

Concluding Remarks

Thanos was a supervillain created to succeed. By personifying a manifestation of the death drive, he is written to be the one that succeeds in every storyline he is a part of, until he does not. The comics feature multiple story arcs where Thanos finds out about some unobtainable power, hungers for it, achieves it and eventually loses it all at once. He always succeeds, but he also always fails. Thus, the fact that Thanos succeeded in *Infinity War* may not have been a surprise for those in the know. As mentioned earlier, the creator of Thanos admitted that his Catholic upbringing had a role in letting Thanos win, stating that as he 'had

religion pounded into him', he 'wanted the bad guy to become God' (Franich). And Thanos does become God, even remains a God for a while once he has acquired this power. He calls himself merciful, believes that his actions are perfectly justified. And while in the comics he acts to gain the favour of Mistress Death, in the films he acts on behalf of himself, believing the mission to be completely worthy in and of itself.

Thanos's presentation in the films spanning the first two phases of the MCU and *Infinity War* is as that of the unknown, the threatening force with impure motives. The advantage that presenting Thanos in such an open-ended way is that it allows for multiple interpretations. As mentioned at the start of this chapter, Thanos embodies multiple tropes of classic Gothic supervillains, and is hence presented to be one as well. He also abides by the regulations set forth by Noel Carroll in his book, *The Philosophy of Horror*. For Carroll, the monster is 'a being in violation of the natural order' (40), and a text qualifies as art-horror as long as it inspires 'an emotional state wherein, essentially, some nonordinary physical state of agitation is caused by the thought of a monster, in terms of *the details presented by a fiction*, or an image' (35, original emphasis). Carroll also speaks of the 'uncanny event which ... causes a sense of unease and awe, perhaps of momentary anxiety and foreboding' (42).

Thanos's existence as the unknown threat places him in the monstrous category, not just his alien origins or his warped features. In *Infinity War*, once his motives are clarified – which are monstrous enough on their own – his intentions towards and treatment of both his daughters only cement his monstrosity, elevating him to the level of the supervillain. The 'uncanny event' here would be Thanos's genocide, since this event was 'constructed to move the audience rhetorically to the point that one entertains the idea that the unavowed, unknown, and perhaps concealed and inexplicable forces rule the universe' (Carroll 42). The most powerful beings on planet Earth, the Avengers, had absolutely no hope of defeating Thanos

once he acquired the Gems. The final scene as they run towards Thanos while Wanda destroys the Mind Gem amplifies this horror.

Thanos has had the advantage of a long-drawn arc that carried over multiple films, which aided in his study as a monster. Gothic literature defines monsters as beings that ‘represent an attempt to exorcise the ghosts of the past’ (Mighall xviii). The ghosts that Thanos is erasing then might be related to contemporary America’s passive stance on the issues of climate change. After all, monsters in comic books also represent the ‘Anti-American’, with Tomabechi’s finding that the monstrosity of supervillains is expressed through their ‘Anti-Americanness’ (95). However, not all monstrous figures in comic books represent this evil, since one of the most popular superheroes is consistently represented as a misunderstood monster – the Hulk. The Hulk’s heroism is established by the films and comics by creating a contrast between the two personas; Dr Bruce Banner and the Hulk are different aspects of the same person.⁶⁴ Each film further humanises the monster by placing the romantic interest, Betty Ross, as the Hulk’s own anchoring point. Thanos has Gamora, but the evil intent and ambition for power at any cost villainise him. Thanos’s monstrous appearance reveals his monstrous motives; no efforts at humanising him would convince the spectators otherwise.

Other characters like the heroes themselves, or villains like Loki, could also inspire such intensive analyses. But Thanos becomes of major interest for this thesis as he personifies the Gothic through multiple elements. As explained in the previous section, he is the hero-villain, the manifestation of Death, the sublime villain, the wanderer, the seeker of forbidden knowledge, all in one.⁶⁵ Various actions he carries out amplify the different aspects of the Gothic that he embodies, and as a result he becomes a classic Gothic Supervillain: the one who

⁶⁴ The Hulk has for long been designed as the superhero narrative’s version of *Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, with the Hulk being an interpretation of Mr. Hyde. For Harris, the Hulk is a combination of two Gothic villains, Mr. Hyde and The Creature created by Victor Frankenstein in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (314).

⁶⁵ Each of these types embody Thanos’ characterisations at different parts of his narrative journey, as this chapter has established. The accumulation of each of these archetypes allows Thanos to be read as a classic Gothic Supervillain, embodying various traits of previous Gothic villains as suits the situation.

personifies the terrifying, who relies on his own melodramatic⁶⁶ ability to inspire fear and in turn draws strength from it, who has doomed himself with this mission, cursed with the knowledge of power and the will to obtain it. Such a reading of Thanos, and comic-book supervillains, further enriches the argument for the Gothic mode's influence on superhero films. With this villain having proven exactly what it means to be a Gothic supervillain, the next point of inquiry would be to look at how one of the most popular comic book supervillains would fit in.

The concept of the monstrous and its relation to villainy is further complicated as the thesis moves into the next chapter. While Thanos's monstrosity is prominently displayed in his physicality and further implied in his behaviour, the next chapter's subject – the Joker – enacts monstrosity differently. Further, the idea of character as mobile signifier, though relevant to this chapter's study of Thanos, is much more prominent in analyses of the Joker. Gothic villainy is not defined by any specific characteristics: as the Introduction has discussed, villainy in the Gothic mode has meant confronting different cultural anxieties at different moments. Thanos embodies multiple elements in moderation, allowing his characterisation to be read in light of the early Gothic villain. The next chapter analyses the Joker, the presence or absence of meaning that this supervillain generates and further connections to the Gothic that are produced.

⁶⁶ Melodrama here follows the same definition that was established in the Introduction of this thesis, with Brooks' phrase 'overt villainy that manifests itself in dark plots, suspense, persecution of the good' highly applicable here (Brooks 16–20).

Chapter 2 - The Joker as the Fear of the Unknown

Introduction: Defining the Fear of the Unknown

Sometimes that shark looks right at ya. Right into your eyes. And the thing about a shark is he's got lifeless eyes. Black eyes. Like a doll's eyes. When he comes at ya, he doesn't even seem to be livin' ...

Robert Shaw as Quint, *Jaws* (1975)

The above quotation is from the film *Jaws* in a scene where the professional shark-hunter Quint shares stories of his exploits with his teammates. Quint reveals he was on the USS *Indianapolis*, a ship that was the target of a major international war and a subsequent shark attack. Having survived the attack, Quint claims to have knowledge of how to deal with the shark menace that has been terrorising their local tourist town, and this quote validates his claim. His description of the shark that attacked him and his crew, that the shark 'looks right at ya' with its 'lifeless eyes' adds to the temperament of the shark. By the way he talks of sharks, and this film's general positioning of the shark as well, they are viewed as mystical beings with unknowable power. The shark has no means to explain its motives, no method through which other characters in the film and audiences could understand its positioning. Its intentions are singular, and though its method of attack is mysterious, the outcome of engaging with the shark remains the same.

The shark then becomes a Gothic figure of terror, an aspect of Gothic novels that had to do with 'trembling, the liminal, the sense of waiting fully adumbrated' (Punter, 'Terror' 245). As Punter details, terror offers both a 'submersion in a condition of political abjection' and a sense of escape, of re-emergence from the hiding place ('Terror' 244). While horror is quite explicit by nature, terror lies in the ambivalence, the 'undecidability, and above all ... the equivocal' (Punter, 'Terror' 245). As much as the film relies on the visual of the shark to shock audiences, it relies that much more on the responses to the shark, legends and myths

about the shark and the glimpses and hints of the shark's presence. It is the unknowability of the shark, as well as its natural habitat, that makes it such a fearsome object. The vast ocean in which it resides denotes that it could emerge from anywhere at any time; but it also denotes that escape is a possibility if the hunters are quick enough. Yet having any such optimistic outlook is one of doom; there is only one outcome that is possible when confronting such an object of terror – and this knowledge only amplifies the terror. It is through this understanding of Gothic terror that this chapter focuses on the Joker. After all, comic writer Steve Englehart himself makes the same comparison: '[l]ike a shark, [the Joker is] moving forever forward, forever savouring the delicacies that come his way, reserved just for him because only he can sense them' (xiii).

This chapter analyses the Joker, an immensely popular supervillain who has inspired as much variation as scholarly debate, as a mobile signifier, who appears in the film *Joker* (2019) and whose villainy is theorised through the framework of the Gothic. Gothic concepts such as the Unknown, the grotesque, monstrosity and paranoid Gothic are applied to understand how the Joker functions as an actant in this film. Each of these terms, defined and discussed in detail later in the text, adds to an understanding of the Joker's role as the supervillain and how the narrative of the film completely diminishes the presence of the superhero. Through the analysis of the Joker as a mobile signifier in all his comic and previous film iterations and in his titular film, this chapter finds *Joker* to be a distinctly Gothic text. The film uses certain identifying markers from the superhero narrative to present a Gothic narrative, further displaying the generic flexibility of both genres.⁶⁷ The key questions this chapter addresses then are:

1. How does the Joker function as a mobile signifier?

⁶⁷ As has been detailed in the Introduction of this thesis, the Gothic is understood in this thesis as a mode, meaning a genre that has displayed a capability to move through time and evolve as it does the same. Genre, then, is implemented through Frow's understanding of genre as 'a form of symbolic action' (2), which works in line with scholars who have understood the expansive capabilities of the Gothic as 'an adjective as well as noun' (Massé 313), a 'mode of literary expression that warrants direct responsibility for cultural change' (Piatti-Farnell and Beville 3), and as 'an overall tendency in literature rather than a genre' (Round 15).

2. What elements from the Gothic mode play into his supervillainy?
3. How does the film *Joker* address these aspects of the Joker as a narrative actant and as a mobile signifier?

As the chapter analyses the film through a Gothic framework, multiple elements and narrative techniques utilised for the film become representative of a Gothic narrative. The Gothic mainly dealt with ambivalence, with literary devices and techniques activated to heighten this ambivalence and ambiguity (Botting, *Gothic* 5). In early Gothic literature particularly, most such ambivalent occurrences were understood as ‘supernatural occurrences’ (Botting, *Gothic* 5). And since contemporary critical thought into this mode of literature has found that the Gothic mode also functions as ‘a perspective on the world that shapes our sense of experience and identity’, it becomes safe to see how the film *Joker* could be viewed through the same lens (Piatti-Farnell and Beville 3). The entire film is focalized through Arthur’s experiences, as his dissatisfaction with the various social institutions intended to support him, and his struggles with mental illness are highlighted. Various aspects of the Gothic are identified for having informed this reading of the film. Gothic elements such as paranoid Gothic, monstrosity, the grotesque, the abject and more are defined and discussed over the course of this chapter, in an attempt to locate the Joker’s supervillainy.

The Joker was introduced in 1940 by writer Bill Finger and artists Bob Kane and Jerry Robinson. The team was looking to introduce a criminal who was a match for the Batman and Robin’s skills, and so they created the Joker, inspired by an amusement park emblem, Conrad Veidt in *The Man Who Laughs* (1928) and a playing card given to Bob Kane by Jerry Robinson (*The Joker: A Celebration of 75 Years*⁶⁸ 6). He has been reimagined multiple times, almost every writer who helmed a Joker storyline would bring a new approach to the

⁶⁸ This book has been utilised by this thesis to provide context for the characterisation of the Joker when initially created. The book itself is produced by DC Comics, and has not undergone traditional practices of academic peer-review. For the purposes of this thesis, the book has been used to provide references for certain facts about the Joker, not as evidence for claims made by the candidate.

character. The Joker has now become as important to the mythos of the Batman as the Batman himself – he represents the antithesis of the Batman and everything this Dark Knight stands for. The film adaptations only cemented this elevated status that the Joker holds, as each performance of the Joker amplifies a new aspect of his villainy.

Through the years, the Joker's evil changes, as does his relationship with the Batman. Much in the way that Moriarty was created to be the downfall of Sherlock Holmes, the Joker was created with the sole intention of being challenging enough for the Dark Knight to occasionally compromise on his strong beliefs. As Heit states, 'the Joker challenges the values that the Batman upholds by questioning the implicit assumption to do so' (179). The relationship they share is not anything new: it has been discussed, analysed and even spoofed in *The Lego Batman Movie* (2017). Comic writers have made whole storylines spanning multiple comic issues drawing attention to the relationship they share, to the similarities in both their insanity. In the popular graphic novel *The Dark Knight Returns* (1989) by Frank Miller and Klaus Janson, the Joker awakens from a coma when Bruce Wayne dons the cowl after a gap of ten years. In another graphic novel, *The Killing Joke* (1988), author Alan Moore works with the idea that the two are essentially mirror images of each other, exploring how they both had to come to terms with their respective life-altering tragedies that led them to become who they are ('Alan Moore Interview').

Furthermore, Grant Morrison's *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* (1989) is much more implicit in this discussion. Hero and villain, both suggest that perhaps the Batman also belongs in the asylum, along with all the criminals he helped imprison there. This version of the Joker is also suggested to have homosexual tendencies, with his sweet nicknames for the Batman, which the latter abhors. But this Joker, having just killed Jason

Todd,⁶⁹ could also just be playing with the Batman's emotions, as is his way of functioning. The Joker enjoys pulling the Batman to his extremes, as Uricchio and Pearson also find (197). They note that 'the parallels between the Batman and the Joker make the Clown Prince of Crime an equal, but opposite, an evil doppelganger ... the Joker's crazed opposition to the Batman sets up a narrative tension which pulls the Batman's persona to extremes ...' (Uricchio and Pearson 197). A similar strain runs through the filmic representations as well.

But this chapter looks at the Joker from a different perspective, one that matches with the main film being analysed. While the Joker has had multiple appearances on screens – television and film – since the 1960s, he has always appeared as the opposing force that the Batman encounters. The film *Joker* (2019) looks at this character from a different angle. It places the mythos of the Joker at the centre of its narrative, so much so that the Batman is not even a fully grown adult by the time that the Joker has begun his life of crime. Inspired in part by *The Killing Joke* graphic novel, and in part by films like *The King of Comedy* (1982) and *Taxi Driver* (1976), the director Todd Phillips introduced the Joker subsisting in a world that is adamantly against him. The film follows Arthur Fleck, a mentally ill clown with painful fits of laughter, a tendency to idolise strangers and a dependent and abusive mother. Instead of the superhero-fairy tale, this film explores how a broken world treats a broken man. Gotham has never particularly been the shining example of a city,⁷⁰ but the Gotham of *Joker* is particularly downtrodden. The social structures built to help people in their everyday lives are either corrupt or failing (Brown 12; Yadav 15; Redmond 2). There are garbage strikes, super rats and cuts in funding for social services. The narrative makes it seem as though becoming the Joker was the only way Arthur could have survived such an existence.

⁶⁹ Chronologically, the events in this graphic novel occur after 'A Death in the Family', in which Batman's sidekick, the second Robin, Jason Todd, is brutally murdered by the Joker.

⁷⁰ Uricchio's article discusses Gotham in detail, finding the city to be 'both [a] setting and condition for the Batman's Sisyphean struggle to extract justice from an irrepressible criminal underclass' (128).

In this way, the narrative of the film brings Gotham to life, creating another character out of the city. As this chapter will discuss, Gotham as a space functions in similar ways to the Gothic, particularly in its 'Gothic circularity' (Fitch 218). Just as the Gothic's 'persistent fixation on the past returning' plays a role in multiple Gothic narratives (Spooner 200), so does the superhero narrative. By its evocation of Gothic themes in the 'ghosts of family transgressions, guilty concealment' (Arthur's family history is tied with the city's pallbearer Thomas Wayne, a fact hidden until Arthur discovers) (Botting, 'Cities, Homes and Ghosts' 123), *Joker*'s Gotham is depicted as being a space wherein 'terrors derive from situations peculiar to, and firmly located within, the urban experience' (Mighall 30). Mighall finds that in the works of G. W. M. Reynolds, particularly in *The Mysteries of London* (1846), the aspects of the Gothic and the fantastic are employed to evoke sublime and supernatural imagery in the urban landscape (31). Similarly in *Joker*, Arthur's slow mental debilitation is shown to be caused by the city and its failing structures, causing delusions that spectators are also complicit to. The narrative thus creates a sense of paranoiac fiction, which Punter defines as 'a fiction in which the 'implicated' reader is placed in a situation of ambiguity with regard to fears within the text' (*The Literature of Terror Vol 2*, 182). The chapter thus elaborates on these Gothic aspects in *Joker*.

The film generated much debate in relation to its content and the subject matter, both from the academy and critics. The *New Review of Film and Television Studies* published a special edition of their journal with articles about the film a few months after it was released in theatres. One of the major contributors to this edition, Sean Redmond, noted the opposing reactions to the film and finds that *Joker* 'refuse[s] ... coherency as it simultaneously resists dominant ideology's demand for closure' ('The Joke That Isn't Funny Anymore' 2). Redmond went on to publish a collection of essays in a book titled *Breaking Down Joker*, adding to the ongoing discussion. The debates revolve around Arthur Fleck's mental illness, his body and

his unbearable loneliness and how dance showcases his truest self (Young 163; Howell 78; Redmond, '*Joker*: Madly Walking and Dancing Through Space' 36; Jürgens 321; Redmond, '*The Loneliness of Joker*' 65). More articles revolve around the roles that gender, race and class play in the story, and how they aid in the creation of the Joker (Kavka 30; Little 173; Doidge and Rosenfeldt 65). The city of Gotham is discussed, as is the background score – elements that aid the narrative of Arthur Fleck (Fernandez-Moreno and Salvado-Romero 24; Kerins 89).

This chapter focuses on Arthur's journey towards embracing his true identity and the embodiment of the Joker. The Joker has become a character capable of long-lasting readings through the performative aspects of his characterisation. The comics frequently find the Joker facing the Batman in scenarios that display the Joker's performance of excess. At the same time, this excessive performance gives nothing of his personal motivations away to readers or spectators, allowing the Joker to perform displays of clownish tricks while never truly revealing the man behind the clown make-up. Poore notes that such portrayals of villainy add to the 'villain effect', wherein the villain 'often seems to be 'playing to the gallery', 'acting to an audience' while also being 'strangely absent' (29). Quoting Terry Eagleton, Poore finds this 'lack of fixity' to lend the villains such as Moriarty in the *Sherlock* (2010–2017) TV series and the Joker in *The Dark Knight* (2008) a 'problem in being present' (29; Eagleton 51). This villainous performance then is 'a way of being-in-the-world, an amused, disdainful or instrumental attitude towards other people' that is codified as being 'both over-present and strangely distanced' (Poore 40). As this chapter details, Fleck's performance over the course of the film towards becoming the Joker varies starkly, lending the most confident version of his performance the moniker of the Joker.

One of the most compelling aspects of the Joker's characterisation through the decades has been his tendency to function on the lines of chaos – to such an extent that he has spouted

multiple versions of his own origins. This idea will be expanded on in the following sections, but the Joker's ability to be more than his origins – more than his actions – even gives him an iconicity that is unique to his supervillainy. The icon of the Joker, then, has the ability to incorporate multiple meanings and acts as a 'sounding board in relation to which ... specific ideological positions have been constructed' (Bennett and Woollacott 18). Bennett and Woollacott's study of popular hero James Bond as a mobile signifier heavily informs this method of analysing the Joker, continually 'functioning as an established point of cultural reform capable of producing multiple meanings' at once (14). The Joker then further exemplifies a relation with Gothic villains, who were always defined by the cultural anxieties of the time they were written into (Pykett 'Sensation and the Fantastic in the Victorian Novel' 214). Specific examples as James Bond, the Joker, Sherlock Holmes and few more reach a level of iconicity wherein they are able to incorporate multiple meanings. Such a method of analysing the Joker expands the scope of his characterisation beyond just the one film – it enables a study of the icon itself, analyses each narrative decision with relation to this icon and thereby allows for the Joker's origins to remain 'multiple choice' (Moore and Bolland 41). In this way, the Joker embodies the idea of the mobile signifier in a more holistic manner than Thanos or Harley Quinn.

Further on, the origins of the Joker, the idea of performativity is reflected in the vague origin stories that have circulated around his mythos for years. The comic book narrative highly values the origin story, as its reiteration carries out the task of introducing a new team of writers and artists, thereby bringing to light some new aspects of the character and thus with the creation of new material and/or connections, a continuity will be reinstated and conserved (Reynolds 48). Similarly, comic book inspired superhero films have heavily depended on the origin story to introduce the character to mass audiences, thus creating a 'convenient means of consolidating multiple decades of comic book continuity' including the introduction of

powers, visual transformation, enemies and weaknesses (Walton 98). The physical transformation that superheroes undergo in their origins is thought of as the ‘main story’ by scholar Jeffrey Brown, who states that ‘[t]he spectacle of transformation serves as both the emotional and the narrative centerpiece [*sic*] of most of the films’ (*The Modern Superhero in Film and Television* 38). The Joker’s origins differ from those of the superheroes, since his ‘multiple choice’ origin story functions as yet another shifting signifier – whatever the origin of the character may be, the Joker and his crimes remain the spectacle of the character.

As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, Gothic literature had been utilised as a mode reflecting on the cultural anxieties of the time, and these cultural anxieties were embodied in the villains of each narrative. The shifting of meanings was assigned to one particular type of villain, which was the monster. More a category of villains, the monster category is not bound by ‘classificatory structurations’ and as a projection then (Cohen ix), Cohen notes that ‘the monster exists only to be read’ (5). Cohen further describes the monster as ‘a mixed category’ and ‘demanding instead a “system” allowing polyphony, mixed response (difference in sameness, repulsion in attraction), and resistance to integration’ (7). Poore connects this definition of the monster to villains, stating that a villain ‘derives his or her threat from a propensity to change form, to transgress boundaries’, whose activities ‘make themselves available as ways of “reading” contemporary culture and our ideas of unacceptable behaviour’ (19). This Joker in particular finds a commonality with the monstrous, with Arthur’s ‘fluid and unstable subjectivity’ proving ‘monstrous in the mediatised present’ (Little 176). This chapter elaborates how in becoming the monstrous Joker, Arthur transforms (parallel to superhero transformations) from a mentally ill meek man into a dancing, clown-faced, confident killer.

This depiction of the supervillain as a mentally ill challenges the film’s narrative positioning, creating empathy for a character who has consistently been villainised since his

inception. *Joker* is not the first text to place the Joker at the helm of the narrative, the video game *Batman: Arkham Knight* (2015) has the Joker take over the game's controls, 'jeopardis[ing] the very concept of avatars as frequently used within the digital game medium' (Conway 157).⁷¹ In doing so, the Joker performs what Conway identifies as 'benign violations: ultimately harmless disruptions of the narrative' (167). However, *Joker* functions differently, with Brown stating that 'audience identifications and ideological perceptions are shifted in *Joker* because without a hero, viewers are aligned with the tragic conditions of Arthur Fleck's reality', thereby positioning Arthur as a 'hero for the subaltern, a champion of a justifiable chaos' ('A City Without a Hero' 11). Arthur's mental illness in this film 'visually others him from the rest of society', yet his 'illness' is one that results from childhood brain injury rather than psychological illness (Young 163, 164).⁷² While the narrative focuses primarily on Arthur's illness leading to his transformation into the Joker, the character's prominent mythos challenges a sympathetic view towards Arthur, which this chapter examines in detail.

As this chapter finds, becoming the Joker allows Arthur to live without constraints on his physical and mental well-being. The closer he is in his transformation to the grotesque figure of the Joker, the more uninhibited he is represented as. Multiple eminent scholars have defined the grotesque in terms of its bodily implications. For example, Bakhtin's grotesque body focuses on the 'material thingness of the human subject rather than intellect or spirit', while for Kristeva, the grotesque and abject are closely related, a 'body of fear, but fear tempered with fascination' (Hurley 138). The abject is 'the ambiguous, the composite, ... the killer who claims he is a saviour ... the immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady' (Kristeva 4). For Kristeva, the corpse is 'the utmost of abjection', an image that is plentiful in Gothic

⁷¹ Conway thus relates the Joker to Carl Jung's Trickster figure, 'both subhuman and superhuman, a bestial and divine being, whose chief and most alarming characteristic is his unconsciousness' (263). While common traits of the Trickster include paradox, absurdity, grotesquery and subversion, the Trickster is also a 'catalyst of personal, social, cultural and political transformation' (Conway 158–159).

⁷² Young even hesitates to call Arthur mentally ill, choosing to refer to Arthur as suffering from 'madness' instead (162).

literature (4; Creed 10). As Creed specifies, Gothic horror ‘abounds in images of ... the corpse, whole and mutilated’, as well as ‘an array of bodily wastes such as blood, vomit, saliva, sweat, tears and putrefying flesh’ (10). The grotesque has been an element utilised in Gothic horror, with some readings leaning towards the comic as well.

Bakhtin’s understanding of the grotesque relates to the medieval carnival, celebrating ‘temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order’ (10). This comic understanding of the grotesque is also prevalent in Victor Hugo’s *Preface to Cromwell*, who applied the grotesque to ‘artistic images of the ugly, linking it with aesthetically monstrous and extremes of the comic, or both in combination’ (Cornwell 175). The influence of Gwynplaine from *The Man Who Laughs*, one of the inspirations for the character as mentioned above, is stark in this portrayal. This chapter finds that Hugo’s work, not just with Gwynplaine but also with the concept of the grotesque itself, informs this inquiry into the Joker in multiple ways. Contrast becomes evident when we note that Hugo’s monstrous figures were depicted to be pure of heart, therefore showcasing the paradox of the monstrous figure. While *Joker* demands sympathy for Arthur, his transformation into the Joker is one that does not align him with Hugo’s characters.

The Joker’s long-standing popularity and multiple interpretations have no doubt had an impact on the latest version of the Joker in this film. By rewriting the origin, to an extent, the creators of this film are able to get to the foundation of this actant – the Joker is a mentally ill white man living in a city gone to ruins and chooses a life of villainy. The performance of his villainy is what changes from one interpretation to the other, but the essence of his character remains. His self-proclaimed status as an agent of chaos solidifies the long-standing tradition of evil from which he is created. The appeal of this actant is in his transgression, in the ‘terror and horror eliciting rejection and disgust ... draw[ing] eyes and imaginations in fascination to peep behind the curtain of limitation in the hope of glimpsing illicit excitements made all the

more alluring for bearing the stamp of mystery or prohibition' (Botting, *The Gothic* 2). In other words, the Joker's appeal is in his performance as the Gothic supervillain.

The Joker's mental insanity is one that has been a major part of the character's mythos, especially since Morrison's *Arkham Asylum*, wherein the Joker and his multiple identities are collated as being an effect of his 'super-sanity' (Morrison 40). While this 'super-sanity' has allowed for the Joker to evade the criminal justice system despite the high number of victims, it has become a defining feature of the Joker's own methods to and source of supervillainy (Langley 163). Yet this method of defining a character's villainy is one that is prominent among comic book narratives and has functioned as another way of othering the villains from the mentally stable superheroes. Fennell notes how in comic book narratives, the 'most severe deformities and injuries are reserved for villains', with the horror of the villain's deformity being a direct correlation to their acts of villainy (311). The ethics of this are dubious, but then again have existed since studies of atavism were directly applied to Victorian Gothic and detective novels, particularly to villains like Moriarty, Fu Manchu and Dr Mabuse (Kohns). Just as in atavistic villains, who are defined as criminals due to specific naturally occurring physical characteristics (Kohns),⁷³ superhero comic book villains are deformed before they become criminal 'in ways that provide advance warning about the precise kind of villain they are' (Fennell 322). Thus, in superhero comic book logic, the villains are 'deserving' of punishment as laid out by their superhero counterparts because 'their appearances reflect their criminal personalities' (Fennell 322). This representation does not help in aiding the destigmatisation towards such patients in real life, with Scarf and colleagues noting that such associations of mental illness with violence 'may erode support for policies ... may exacerbate self-stigma for those with mental illness' (2).

⁷³ Cesare Lombroso, whose study influenced Kohns, defines nineteenth-century criminals on a hierarchal scale wherein Europeans are described as displaying least criminal tendencies and non-Europeans displaying more criminal tendencies (Kohns, Ferrero 140). This understanding of racist ideology utilised to define the morality of fictionally evil characters is not new, but history is something to be considered when studying supervillains.

The Joker in the Comics

The Joker became a popular character quite quickly in the comics from the first issue of 'The Batman' written by Bill Finger and drawn by Bob Kane and Jerry Robinson. As mentioned in the earlier section, the creators had multiple sources of inspiration when creating this character, and they also had clear motives for what the character's function was for the comic issues in which he would make an appearance. As time went by and new writers took over the Joker's narrative, one thing that remained constant was the Batman's inability to completely defeat the Joker. The Joker has consistently remained the Batman's anathema – his first few appearances set the tone for what the Joker was meant to be. The 1940s found a murderer, and although this would not last for long, he was mostly a criminal with a giant ego who dressed like a clown and used a deadly gas on his victims, freezing their mouths into a horrible grin (*The Joker: A Celebration of 75 Years* 6–7). His first few years characterised him mainly as a flamboyant bank robber, revelling in gimmicks with a distinctive personality that would last several decades (*The Joker: A Celebration of 75 Years* 50). His crimes at this point were less lethal and goofier than earlier, setting up outlandish traps for Batman and Robin, and even crossing paths with other villains like Catwoman and the Penguin.

What remained constant through these first few years was the Joker's ability to outsmart the Batman until the very end. The Joker was a serious threat hidden under jaunty clown make-up and a mile-wide grin. He was an immensely popular character, playing on the readers' insecurities and never fully revealing his true motivations (Peaslee and Weiner, xvii). However, the establishment of the Comics Code Authority in the 1950s significantly changed the Batman's narrative, and criminals like the Joker were replaced with alien threats or sci-fi monsters (*The Joker: A Celebration of 75 Years* 50). As briefly mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, these strict guidelines did not allow for 'scenes of horror, excessive bloodshed, gore, and gruesome crimes, depravity, lust, sadism, masochism ...', as a result of which the

Joker would not be featured for a few years in DC's Batman comics (Gabilliet 39, qtd. in Morton 44). These comic books would feature 'more fantastic adventure storylines', with a turn away from crime-fighting (*The Joker: A Celebration of 75 Years* 50).

An origin story for the Joker was explored in 1951, ten years after his first appearance, in 'The Man Behind the Red Hood' (*Detective Comics* #168). The story follows a lab worker who, deciding to steal a million dollars, adopts a disguise of 'the Red Hood' that consists of a red helmet and an oxygen mask. When escaping, the worker has to swim through a pool of chemical waste that turns his hair green, lips rouge red and skin chalk white – thus giving birth to the Joker (Boichel 11). By the 1970s, post CCA restrictions, the Batman became a creature of the night once again, and the Joker was a killer once again (*The Joker: A Celebration of 75 Years* 138). He was now more dangerous and unpredictable, and eventually was the star of his own title published from 1975 to 1976. This title was not about the Batman at all, it featured the Clown Prince of Crime meeting and manipulating other major villains of the DC Universe, such as Two-Face and Lex Luthor (*The Joker: A Celebration of 75 Years* 140).

The years 1986 to 1989 found major storylines featuring the Joker, with Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, Moore and Bolland's *The Killing Joke*, Starlin and Aparo's 'A Death in the Family' and, finally, Morrison and McKean's *Arkham Asylum* (*The Joker: A Celebration of 75 Years* 140–141). *The Killing Joke* was a reimagining of that first origin story, but the lab worker was now a failed stand-up comedian and an unemployed mob lackey. This story introduced a similarity between the Batman and the Joker, presenting the case of one bad day being the trigger that could lead anyone to madness, including the ever-stoic Commissioner Gordon. In the storyline 'A Death in the Family', Joker brutally beats the second Robin, Jason Todd, to death – an event that shocked many readers and marked the impossibility of redemption for the Joker (*The Joker: A Celebration of 75 Years* 141). Finally, in *Arkham*

Asylum, the Joker's madness is given a possible cause, that he has some sort of super-insanity, something never seen before, that thereby explains the shift in his actions through the years.

The year 1989 was an important one for the mythos of the Batman – multiple texts were released over the span of a few months that created a 'Bat-mania' – bringing the Dark Knight and his associated characters to the forefront of popular culture.⁷⁴ Along with the aforementioned comic book stories, the Batman was entering other forms of media with a dedicated style that became primarily associated with The Caped Crusader. This year was particularly influential in establishing the superhero narrative as a 'hybrid text', a term coined by Jim Collins where texts manage to exist beyond the genre they were initially ascribed to (179). The Joker's place in such a hybrid text is naturally that of the villain, but specifically a trope found predominantly in Gothic narratives representing terror.

The comics and graphic novels from the year 1989 set in stone this type of terror that the Joker embodies, and films – a format that would accommodate the superhero narrative with ease – homed in on this aspect of the Joker's villainy. The next section of this chapter discusses the multiple filmic adaptations that the Batman and his rogues gallery participated in.

The Joker's Filmography: Villainous Performativity on Film

As much of a terror that the Joker presents himself to be in the comic format, the audiovisual medium of film/television brought to life new ways of perceiving the true evil of the Joker. As Poore notes, 'Villainy is a performance ... It is a superior style, a way of being-in-the-world, an amused, disdainful or instrumental attitude towards other people', and the Joker's main method of displaying his villainy is through the performance of the clown (40). Comic book writer Steve Englehart notes that as much as the Joker wants to steal, 'he also wants to dazzle the world (and one particular cowed person in it) with his audacity' (xi). The

⁷⁴ Meehan's article goes into detail about the commodification of the Batman in the year 1989, finding 'the interpenetration of music, film, print and video industries ... is orchestrated by the conglomerate in its search for more profitable and cost-efficient ways to manufacture culture' (56).

multiple performances in live action and animation have thus managed to simultaneously draw from pre-existent sources in the comic books while themselves adding to the mythos of the Joker, allowing the Joker to embody the idea of a mobile signifier more than any other supervillain. This section details the multiple performances that have added to the mythos of the Joker.

The Joker's comics became popular again after the 1966 TV show *Batman* was aired (*The Joker: A Celebration of 75 Years* 51). The Joker, as a character in live-action film, had existed since the famously infamous TV show *Batman* (1966) which also had a film of the same name launch in the same year as its first season. The Joker was a part of the TV series and the film, but no origin was provided for him – no reason for why he became the Joker. The Joker would next appear in Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989) played by the immensely famous Jack Nicholson. In fact, the production for the film was greenlit majorly due to the star power that director Burton and Nicholson brought to the table; the Dark Knight himself, Michael Keaton, was not a major actor at that point. Audiences, upon hearing of Keaton's casting in the role of Batman were upset, expecting a similar campy treatment of the material that the 1966 version was known for, because of Keaton's previous performances (De Vries).⁷⁵ The film follows Jack Napier, a mob underling's unfortunate dip into a vat of chemicals that leads to his transformation into the Joker, having been afflicted with chalk-white skin, emerald-green hair and a rictus smile. While Jack Napier's fall-into-chemicals-which-makes-him-the-Joker event is borrowed from *The Killing Joke* storyline, not much else is. The film also stands apart in introducing the Joker to be the one who murdered the Wayne couple, the Batman's parents. Comic lore has long held that Bruce Wayne (the Batman's playboy millionaire alter-ego) made a promise to wage his war on crime in Gotham because his parents were murdered in a brutal

⁷⁵ At this point, Keaton was predominantly popular for his comedic roles in films like *Mr Mom* (1983) and *Beetlejuice* (1988). Protesting audiences launched a letter writing campaign voicing concerns about the 'high-concept Batman' and Keaton's casting (De Vries).

crime of no consequence by a random criminal (later named Joe Chill) – *Batman* (1989) altered that narrative detail as well to suit their own storyline. Carter notes that for the first time, with Nicholson's performance, the Joker was 'depicted in a manner that accurately showed the many facets of his character' (54–55).

The Joker did not make an appearance in live-action media for a while after Jack Nicholson's performance. The Joker did appear in animated TV shows and films, voiced by *Star Wars* hero Mark Hamill. Years later, the Joker was back in live-action cinema in *The Dark Knight* (2008), played by Heath Ledger and directed by Christopher Nolan in his 'realistic' take on Batman (Jeffries 2). Ledger's performance as the Joker in *The Dark Knight* displayed just how dangerous and terrifying the Joker could be. Ledger won a posthumous Academy Award for this performance, having passed away months before the film's release.

The strategy implemented to sell this film is reminiscent of the first superhero film *Superman: The Movie* (1978), with its insistence on the 'realism' that this iteration of the character brings to the mythos of the Batman. *Superman's* director Richard Donner stressed on the film's verisimilitude, and similarly Nolan's trilogy was sold with the insistence that 'Batman's status within the superhero universe' was a stark contrast to 'the aliens and deities who surround him' (Brooker 90). Brooker's study of the trilogy finds that this language adopted by Nolan and writer David Goyer to advertise the realism implies 'specific approaches to performance, editing, characterisation and narrative', thus expressing 'a broader and more significant meaning of no-nonsense masculinity' (93). This realism, however, mostly serves as a strategy to distance the text from previous iterations of the character – similar to *Superman* and its insistence on a '100% straight, no spoof, no satire' method to filmmaking (Mary Murphy, qtd. in Morton 47). Nolan's trilogy was launched in an effort to distance itself from director Joel Schumacher's films *Batman Forever* (1995) and *Batman and Robin* (1997) – which were criticised for being 'bloated, camp disasters' (*Total Film*, qtd. in Brooker 102).

However, such methods of legitimising are reminiscent of the Early Gothic's tendency towards legitimising undertaken by introducing documents of authenticity and historical backgrounds as a method of defence. As Round finds, Gothic's 'performative structuring' through 'paratextual material and use of layered stories'⁷⁶ has been a defining feature of the mode, identifiable through the stories within stories, proofs of antiquity and authenticity, extracts from local news reports created to make these texts more genuine and other such formulae (19). The implementation of a historical background to address contemporary issues worked both ways: the projection of the present onto the past 'allows the reason and virtue of the present a brighter reflection' while also using 'the historical background ... to defend the text against contemporary accusations that it may encourage error and superstition' (Botting, 'In Gothic Darkly' 14). Similarly, in the DC's insistence on a 'realistic' approach to filmmaking, a contrast is presented against 'the gothic stylings of Burton, but more significantly, with the camp of Schumacher' (Brooker 103). Thus, in the repression of the past iterations of these characters, the creators ultimately serve to remind spectators of past iterations, cementing the status of these characters as palimpsests, as mobile signifiers: 'already carrying the faint shapes of Burton's Batman, Schumacher's Batman, O'Neil's Batman and countless others, back to Kane's original of 1939' (Brooker 106).

The Joker in *The Dark Knight* was a nameless, origin-less, unknown force that worked to disrupt any sense of order that the Batman held on to. Throughout the film, we see the plans that the Joker orchestrates and how they serve to prove a point about the precariousness of absolute world views. He states in a dialogue with Dent that he is not a man with a plan, but we know this to be a lie since he has multiple plans laid out to accomplish any task. The opening

⁷⁶ This technique of utilising different media within the narrative is also utilised in certain Batman comic book stories such as *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Subway Jack: A Batman Adventure* which uses modes such as 'journal entries, case files from the Bat Computer, first person narration from the Batman and Commissioner Gordon's perspectives, third person narration from the authorial voice and so forth' (Collins 165). Other comic stories also frequently adopt this method of hybrid storytelling.

scene with the bank robbery is enough to prove that. Over the course of the film, he gives different versions of his origin story to different people, perhaps choosing how best to intimidate the people around him.⁷⁷ He wants to prove to the world that Batman is a fraud, that Harvey Dent is a fraud, and that the ideals they stand for are irrelevant. When he succeeds in turning Dent, White Knight of Gotham, into the broken maniacal Two-Face, he treats it as a matter of course. He orchestrates Rachel's death knowing it would affect Dent, an event that also ends up affecting Wayne a little more than the Batman.⁷⁸ But if it is still hard to point out any reason for his madness, Alfred helpfully states that 'some men just want to watch the world burn'. In the same way, this Joker changes his origin story on a whim, he could really just be the 'dog chasing cars' he calls himself, not knowing what to do when he has what he wants. Some things are clear – that he is not after the money, that he hates Dent on principle and that he wants the Batman to prove to be a decent opponent by killing him.

A large part of what makes this depiction of the Joker a terrifying and convincing one is owed almost entirely to Ledger's performance of the character. Hassoun finds that the film itself is an epitome of the stylistic tropes borne out of contemporary Hollywood, including rapid editing rates and tight singles for dialogue scenes (8). This performance by Ledger was quite impactful when he played the roles of other villains as well, with Poore and Mittmann finding that Andrew Scott's performance as Moriarty in the *Sherlock* television series is owed to Ledger's 'dark, warped portrayal' (Mittmann 170–174, qtd. in Poore 29). This Joker is written to essentially be a blank slate, an unknown terror whose next move could never be predicted. He embodies the Gothic terror as well, a fear that Punter describes as the fear of 'contamination; that, unknown to ourselves, in the extremity of our terror, we become the very monsters from which we flee' (*The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 247). He might as well be

⁷⁷ This Joker takes ownership of the 'multiple choice' origin stories, weaponizing it towards other characters in the film and towards spectators as well.

⁷⁸ Rachel is an established love interest for Bruce Wayne, and in this film is romantically attached to Harvey Dent.

describing the Joker's motives for the film in this explanation – whose intentions are to show the world that any good person could turn evil when pushed enough. He is proven right in Harvey's turn to Two-Face, but is proven wrong in the final ship-bomb scene.

A few more years later, DC launched its own cinematic universe, the DCEU (DC Expanded Universe), beginning with Superman in *Man of Steel* (2013). When Batman's introduction in *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016) (played by Ben Affleck) showed the Joker's existence, it was not a version of the Joker that film audiences had met yet. This Joker had engaged with the Batman in the past and even defeated him, all this storytelling occurring through one shot when Wayne looks at a suit spray-painted with the words 'HAHAHA Joke's on you BATMAN'. It integrates 'A Death in the Family' storyline from the comics where the Batman's protégé, Jason Todd, the second to take on the mantle of Robin, was murdered by the Joker. Having established that this Joker would be *that* Joker, the DCEU's next project was *Suicide Squad* (2016) where the Joker finally made an appearance, performed by Jared Leto. He was relegated to the role of Harley Quinn's abusive boyfriend in this film, and he is also a gangster, an aspect director David Ayer indicated through the tattoos and multiple henchmen that this Joker has.

Since Harley Quinn was among the protagonists of the film, and not the Joker, his brand of villainy in this film was that of the abusive boyfriend – manipulating Dr Harleen Quinzel into falling in love with him, electrocuting her and taking her to Ace Chemicals for her to prove her love for him. She believes in him, voluntarily falls into the vat of chemicals and becomes Harley Quinn. When she gets taken in by the Batman (who has several brief cameos in the film) and is arrested by government agent Amanda Waller, the Joker tortures various minions to find and rescue Quinn, and attempts to take her away from the mission she is on. He is stopped by Waller, who shoots down the helicopter he is in. Later, however, the Joker is revealed to be alive as he rescues Harley from Belle Reve penitentiary, where she and other

members of the Suicide Squad have been kept as prisoners. Leto's Joker also briefly appeared in *Zack Snyder's Justice League* (2021), in a Knightmare post-apocalyptic reality where the Batman has recruited the Joker as a part of an insurgency against Superman. Here, the Joker taunts the Batman with the deaths of his parents and that of Robin, and the Batman taunts the Joker back, with the death of Harley Quinn.

The DCU is still a growing universe, and has not had the ability to reach the success that its competitor Marvel did. Characters like Lex Luthor, Deathstroke and the Joker have had appearances in these films but have not had the ability to be fully fleshed out. At the time of writing, the DCU consists of eleven films over nine years, and there are more films planned for the future. While the Joker in this filmic universe has had a comparatively small role, and not a particularly well-accepted one, he does exist, and he has created havoc that the Joker is known for.

An essential aspect of the Joker's storyline is the relationship shared with his antagonist, Batman. Each interpretation of the Joker's villainy and the Batman's heroism may slightly vary, but the dynamic that the two share is more or less constant, and has been so for quite some time. The *Batman* TV show from 1966 did not have these ideas, since they had not been developed in the comics either by the time the show had come out. Jack Napier of *Batman* (1989) blames his deformity on Batman, and acts more out of revenge than anything else. He wants to get back at Batman for changing the way he looks, which he seemed to value in one of his first scenes. Also, as mentioned above, Jack Napier killed Thomas and Martha Wayne, a further connection between the two archnemeses. During the final fight scene, the Batman says, 'I made you, you made me first' when the Batman reveals to Joker that he killed the Batman/Bruce's parents, although the Joker does not know who the Batman is talking about. In this film, they both have personal reasons for fighting each other, these reasons are created in the film narrative and resolved with the Joker's death in the end.

Ledger's Joker recognised the threat that the Batman posed even before they fought each other. He warns the various mob bosses of Gotham, who do not believe him until later, and tells them the only way they'll get to continue their illegal business is by killing the Batman. The Batman, on the other hand, is not focused on the Joker, he wants to deal with the mob bosses first. The Joker continues to taunt and poke at the Batman, first by killing a man after dressing him up with joker scars and make-up, and in the Batman outfit, and then publicly blaming him for the increasing crime in Gotham. After his first encounter with the Joker, the Batman intends to focus on the mob, but it is Alfred who points out that it was the Batman who pushed the mob to work with a man they did not fully understand.

As he loves to do, the Joker taunts the Batman when they fight, daring the Batman to run over him on his Batpod. In the interrogation scene, Joker admits, 'I don't want to kill you, what would I do without you?', showing that the Joker has already understood the similarities between the two and the relationship they share. It is through this relational setting that the Joker's chaos is viewed, as an opposition to the Batman's ordered mode of performing heroism. The Batman and his rule of not killing the villains he encounters is one that has been challenged multiple times, mostly by the Joker himself, who has taunted the Batman and his rules. It is reminiscent of the Creature in *Frankenstein*, who taunts Victor, 'Come on, my enemy; we have yet to wrestle for our lives' (Shelley 203). For the Joker, it is his performance of the Bakhtinian notion of the 'carnival', wherein 'a jester might be crowned king' through which he taunts the Batman's original promise, to enact his war against crime (81). The Joker's chaotic methods of enacting evil upon the citizens of Gotham is in the name itself; as Peaslee and Weiner find, 'he is a wildcard, a force of will, a compelling power that finds creative ways to unleash chaos and turn Batman's and Gotham City's worlds upside down' (xvi).

The DCEU's Joker has a relationship with Batman that is sort of taken as a matter of fact. *Dawn of Justice* introduces the Batman's mythos with a Batman who has been a superhero

for a few years already. He has been defeated; his ward Robin is gone because his archnemesis has killed him. Added to that, this universe has other characters who have equal stakes in both their shenanigans. In this universe, Batman has to deal with Gods and warrior Amazons. The Joker is head of his mob and has a girlfriend he manages. They are not exclusively obsessed with each other, though they are aware (and wary) of each other.

The Joker's depiction shifts once again when we consider the main text for this chapter, *Joker*. The film acts as an origin story for the Joker, introducing Arthur Fleck and making him the actant whom the narrative follows over the course of the film. Fleck eventually realises his true calling as the Joker, breaking out of the mould that his city has imposed upon him, and finding followers who revel in his brand of chaos. The film introduces a Joker without a Batman, or an accompanying gallery of rogues who have been a part of the mythos since the character's introduction. It places Arthur at the forefront of the narrative, and is set in a time when Thomas Wayne is still alive. Already, a fundamental aspect of the Joker's narrative is shifted off course with this narrative decision. In a way, it mirrors the narrative of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), in which we are given an insight into the monster's mind – how his monstrosity is given shape and form; how his monstrosity might not be his fault at all.⁷⁹

The Joker in *Joker*: Main Analysis

Joker follows the story of Arthur Fleck, a mentally ill man with a history of violence and 'a medical condition causing sudden frequent and uncontrollable laughter that doesn't match how [he] feel[s]'. He works as a performing clown, cares for his sick mother and meets with a state-appointed counsellor to discuss his mental health. But over the course of the narrative, each of these aspects of his life disappoints him, as do a few more. He turns to violence, finding that to be his authentic mode of expression and even receiving recognition

⁷⁹ Chapters 11-16 of the book narrate the Creature's experiences as a new being in the world and serve as his perspective.

for such acts. By the end of the film, he embraces this violence, calling himself The Joker, and revealing himself on live TV. The plot of this film is reminiscent of *The Killing Joke*, the point of which is that one bad day could turn anyone into the worst version of themselves. This film acts as a character study of the Joker as much as it is a meta-narrative on the social structures that govern our daily lives and the influence they have on our states of being. This analysis focuses on the Joker himself, and on this narrative being yet another of his ‘multiple’ origin stories.

Joker’s narrative follows a Joker placed in an alien world – instead of the superhero-fairy tale, this film explores how a broken world treats a broken man. Arthur is mandated to visit a state-employed counsellor who asks all the ‘right’ questions without actually being of any help to him. The institutions that are designed to aid its citizens, be they state provided or personal, all fail Fleck. Through the course of the narrative, he finds that the only way for him to receive any form of validation is through a life of crime, through letting go of societal restrictions and embracing his true form as the Joker. This section details this process by comparing the Joker to the Gothic supervillain, showing how the Joker ascends from the status of mere supervillain to become more threatening.

Mental Illness and Body Politics in *Joker*

Arthur’s physicality is an essential part of his image of himself, and provides insight into how he truly feels at any given point. He walks to and from his home with heavy steps, hunched-backed as though he carries the weight of the world. His bouts of laughter are not out of joy, but are a symptom of a condition for which he carries a card to explain. His laugh is not one of joy or malice – it is in no way the evil laugh mastered by villains. It is a painful laugh, one where he tears up, one that hurts him as he chokes and gags on it, trying unsuccessfully to control the laughter. Arthur’s depression is one of the narrative elements that the film uses to enhance the film’s theme, as he tears up while forcibly stretching his face into a gruesome

smile. In his second scene, Arthur chases after boys who have stolen his sign, and then he gets beaten up by them. In the third scene, he laughs after making faces to entertain a child. He has a card to explain this laugh to wary members of the public, and also to audiences at the same time. The card states that this could happen to anyone with a brain injury or certain neurological conditions, laying forth the possibility that anyone facing what Arthur faces could be susceptible enough to become the Joker. Each of these scenes amplifies the narrative that Arthur is a victim and therefore deserves sympathy. Scholar Merlin Seller states that the film aids in amplifying Arthur's madness to such heights that he cannot seem to help but be the Joker. According to him, '*Joker* becomes a complex and contextualised representation of mental health than previous Jokers, framing mental health like self-hood, as externally produced and environmental' (Seller 5). For another scholar, Young, 'the madness of Fleck visually others him from the rest of society', making it clear that he would never fit in the world he occupies (164).

To escape, Arthur creates fantasies in his head of being accepted, being understood and of belonging to someone. The narrative illustrates his first fantasy when he is at home with his mother watching *Live! With Murray Franklin*, an in-universe talk show hosted by a stand-up comedian. In this fantasy, Fleck sits among the live audiences, and when he shouts out 'I love you, Murray', Murray notices him, asks for him to stand up and introduce himself. With his boyish shyness, Fleck states that he lives with his mother, something the live audience laughs at, but Murray does not. Feeling validated, Arthur now stands taller, 'I take good care of my mom.' When Murray calls him onto the stage, he tells him privately, 'All this, the lights, the cameras, I'd give it up in a heartbeat to have a kid like you', showing Arthur's true desire for a father, for external validation from a paternal figure.

In another fantasy, one that is not revealed to be a fantasy until much later, Arthur dreams up a relationship with his neighbour Sophie. After having met her in their building elevator and

followed her to her place of work, Arthur imagines her coming to his home and confronting him, then stating, 'I was hoping you'd rob the place.' Arthur replies, 'I have a gun, I can come by tomorrow', to which she laughs and says, 'You're so funny, Arthur.' This relationship he dreams of with Sophie continues for a while, until he breaks into her apartment after learning that his mother adopted him and was diagnosed with delusional psychosis. The relationship he fantasises about Sophie shows his desire to be seen by someone who understands his dark sense of humour, his inappropriate jokes and his feeling of wanting to belong. He really notices her when she holds up finger guns to her head, sharing a look of understanding that their apartment building is awful, and that nothing beyond that is any good either. At least, that is what Arthur thinks. The moment they get off the elevator and Arthur pretends to shoot himself in the head, Sophie is clearly wary of him, telling her child to stay with her and keeping her eyes on him while she opens the door to her home. He thinks that he is finally found someone who understands him and the struggles he faces on a daily basis, when she was just sharing a few moments with a stranger on an elevator.

The way these fantasies are shown makes it hard to decipher what is reality and what is fantasy. Young finds Arthur to be an unreliable narrator, stating that

Fleck experiences hallucinations ... but the film does not provide the viewer with specific cues to denote which scenes are hallucinations ... it asks the viewers to be aware of the difficulties inherent in trying to discern the diegetic reality. (166)

Filmmakers usually resort to some form of stylistic device for viewers to know when a particular visual is a flashback, a hallucination or an image part of the character's mind. Hazy visuals, echoing voices, or even white-washed worlds are common stylistic tropes used to denote to audiences when a scene is not an intrinsic part of the narrative, that is, when something does not particularly carry the story forward, just provides details about a character's mental state or about their past, whatever the director is trying to showcase. Director Phillips uses

Fleck's hallucinations as a part of the main narrative; Arthur's fantasies are an important part of his story. The abuse that he discovers was a part of his childhood explains his cry-laugh, but it also explains his hallucinations. The things he wants and desires are the things he fantasises about: a loving father figure and an understanding lover.

As Yadav finds, 'the deluded reality he forges in the private sphere is what helps him cope with the stress and humiliation of the public sphere' (17). Arthur's public world is filled with violence: that which he inflicts upon himself and that which others inflict upon him. He desires to rise up from his current social status, to be a socially accepted stand-up comedian like his idol Murray Franklin. His failure at being able to do this, and the other external factors that inhibit this progress (for example, his job, his mother's wariness of his ability to perform as a comedian and the medication he requires to function in society) possibly have an impact on his psyche (Yadav 19).

The narrative of the film itself could be classified as a paranoid Gothic, defined by Punter as a piece of text that 'enact[s] a classic psychology of paranoia whereby the self is threatened and pursued by its own unaccommodated residues' ('Paranoid Gothic' 215). These texts would frequently feature an individual helplessly in the grip of powerful forces, or dissolved in a web of incomprehensible power ('Paranoid Gothic' 215). As Punter elaborates, paranoiac fiction is that in which the 'implicated reader is placed in a situation of ambiguity with regard to fears within the text, and in which the attribution of persecution remains uncertain and the reader is invited to share in the doubts and uncertainties which pervade the apparent story' (*The Literature of Terror Vol 2*, 183). Such observations occur in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, when Emily observes '[h]er mind, long harassed by distress, now yielded to imaginary terrors; she trembled to look into the obscurity of her spacious chamber, and feared she knew not what' (450). Another example can be found in *The Fall of the House of Usher*, when the narrator hears noises from a story he has been reading:

‘for there could be no doubt whatever that, in this instance, I did actually hear (although from what direction it proceeded I found it impossible to say) a low and apparently distant, but harsh, protracted, and most unusual screaming or grating sound – the exact counterpart of what my fancy had already conjured up for the dragon’s unnatural shriek as described by the romancer’. (Poe 199)

The film *Joker* similarly places its spectators in a position of uncertainty, never clarifying what is real and what is not until the film’s protagonist Fleck himself finds out – adding yet another identifying layer between Fleck and spectators. Fleck is presented as such in the film, surviving at the mercy of forces that he has no control over and trying to find his place in a world that does not care for him. At the same time, the narrative presents questionable information—Sophie’s developing relationship with Arthur and his seeming success on Murray Franklin’s show—without communicating the fact that Arthur is an unreliable narrator. He constantly makes up dream scenarios which are depicted as narrative plot points, revealed only later to be delusions. His relationship with Sophie is an example of such paranoid storytelling, one that at the time seems real but is later proven to be false.

The film portrays Arthur looking at different spaces for acceptance and being quickly rejected by the same. He tries to be a clown and he fails, chasing kids who steal his sign and getting beaten up by them. He tries to work on himself through his therapy sessions, but the city’s services do not have the resources to care enough for him, excluding him from any form of healthcare. He tries to spread joy to a kid on the bus (as his mother said was his purpose in life), but fails as the kid’s mother asks him to leave them alone. He ends up having to imagine a relationship with a woman. He confronts his ‘father’, trying to seek validation there, but Wayne punches him while he is in pain, and drops the bomb that he was actually adopted by Penny. His attempt at being a stand-up comedian ends up causing him public ridicule by his idol, and he gets called on to the show just to be made a joke out of. At this point, he decides to take control, he decides to become the Joker.

Arthur feels comfortable with himself – for the first time – and gains public recognition on the night of the subway murders. Having just lost his job, still wearing his clown outfit, Arthur sits on the train home. Apart from dealing with the loss of the job, Arthur is also betrayed by Randall, the colleague who gave him the gun ‘to protect himself’ because he is Randall’s ‘boy’,⁸⁰ only to find out that Randall told their boss that Arthur demanded a gun from him. While all this is going on in his head, three drunk men, later identified as Wayne’s employees, start troubling a female passenger on the train. She looks to Arthur, who gets nervous and begins his cry-laugh, which gets the drunk men’s attention. They make fun of him, his laugh and eventually start beating him up, like the boys in the first scene of the film. This time, however, Arthur has a gun he was given for protection, which is how he saves himself. He kills one of them by surprise, kills the second almost immediately after, and injures the third. While the third tries to get off the train and escape, Arthur follows him off the train and shoots him. Having committed the crime and then coming to his senses, he starts to run and eventually reaches a public restroom, where he dances and finally comes to accept this part of himself.

There are many coincidences to the murders that later end up working in Arthur’s favour. The fact that he was wearing his clown make-up disguised his true identity. The murders are reported on the news because the victims happen to be Wayne’s employees. The reporter asks Thomas Wayne about the support that the murderer seems to be gaining from the poor, what he calls an ‘anti-rich sentiment’. Wayne further goes on to call all those who support the murderer ‘nothing but clowns’, setting the stage for the protests that begin against the elite of the city. The chaos erupting in the city parallels the chaos erupting in Arthur’s mind, to the point where, as he continues to disconnect from reality, he receives that much more attention

⁸⁰ Showing yet another ‘father figure’ who betrays Arthur, an earlier scene showed Randall giving Arthur the gun to protect himself, letting Arthur know that the latter could ‘pay him back sometime’.

from the masses, both reaching their peak at the end of the film with Arthur fully transformed into the Joker and the masses' riots idolising him (Jimenez-Varea et al. 25).

Arthur becomes his own person after finding out that everything he knows about his mother could have all been a lie. Throughout the film, Arthur's relationship with his mother is explored to be a 'pathological symbiotic bond', as Lehtinen and colleagues found (189). Arthur's comfort around mother figures in the film perhaps stems from the stunted relationship he shares with his own. He cares for his inept mother, bathes her and feeds her. She, on the other hand, discourages his choice of job, insults the house he maintains for them and generally inhibits any semblance of life he might be able to have otherwise. When she gets sent to the hospital, Arthur comes to the realisation that Penny was once sent to Arkham State Hospital for having delusional psychosis, narcissistic personality disorder and for having endangered her child. He finds out that he is not really Penny's son, maybe not even Wayne's. He was adopted by Penny, but Penny, holding on to the story she believes to be true, says that Wayne made up the adoption papers to maintain the lie of Arthur's true identity and to keep their relationship a secret. Arthur cannot stop his cry-laugh upon finding this out. The one thing he knew to be true about his life is cast under doubt. And so, he decides to get rid of it all. He kills his mother, thereby finally becoming an individual with no strings attached. Lehtinen and others find that by

committing matricide, Arthur undergoes a dramatic separation from his mother, moves from the denial of his childhood trauma, accepts his tragic life, and decides to make a change in the world by embracing anarchy and chaos.
(190)

As they have further noted in their article, '... in Arthur's mind, the Joker is the ideal version of himself' (Lehtinen et al. 193). His identity as the Clown murderer is what gives him public validation and some sense of self; everything that is Arthur Fleck has only caused him pain. Arthur reveals to the file clerk at Arkham that even though he thought doing bad things would make him feel guilty, it did not bother him. All through the film, Arthur has tried being Happy

– the boy his mother wants – and happy – generally content with the cards he has been dealt. Everything around him attacks him and falls to shambles, so he decides to stop trying to be happy. He crosses out ‘forget to’ in a sign that reads ‘Don’t forget to smile’, stops taking his medication and starts to see his world through the truth of his experiences. The effort he put into being happy led him to walk around like a zombie, believing his life to be a tragedy (Redmond ‘Madly Walking and Dancing Through Space’, 36–38). When he commits matricide and cuts himself off from everything that was Arthur, he decides to embrace the only identity that brought him some sort of validation, that of the Joker. As the Joker, he is able to commit more gruesome crimes and shrug them off, even make his dark jokes after committing the crime. He is able to dance, feel completely in sync with his physical presence in the world. He does not need the looking glass to find himself anymore, he has become that which he strove to be (Lehtinen et al. 193–195).

Ke Jinde finds Arthur’s transformation to be his performance of villainy (456–457). For Ke Jinde, the Joker is a persona created by Arthur to cope with his harsh reality. He finds seven identities that Arthur performs through the course of the film: that of a dutiful son, a collegial colleague, a sturdy lover and more (457). According to Ke Jinde, ‘like an actor trying on different interpretations of a character, Arthur is playing out and trying out what he could be by being different persons’ (457). While this argument does hold value, it is important to note that here, again, Arthur is placed as the one in control rather than the Joker. Ke Jinde notes that Arthur has the control to switch between himself and the Joker with considerable ease, but this places the power in Arthur’s hands. Arthur, the helpless man-child who lets boys beat him up and talks to other men around him like a child, who just wants a hug from a man he believes to be his father.

Arthur is the person who knows that bringing a gun into the workplace is wrong because he has been told so. He is the person who keeps asking for medication because he has been told

that it would help him ‘not feel so bad anymore’ (again, using childish language). Arthur does not know how to control his anger or his frustration, shown in the scene when he gets told by his boss that he would have to pay for a sign stolen from him. He puts on an impassive smile, and later goes out to kick some garbage cans, ending up in the garbage himself. It is when the Joker emerges, perhaps in small instalments at first, that Arthur finally feels secure in himself.

Joker and the Batman

As mentioned in the sections above, this film is unique among the superhero films in that it presents a superhero narrative without any identifiable superheroes. The relationship that the Joker shares with the Batman is one of co-dependence – one cannot exist without the other, and this specific trope has been explored by multiple writers in comic, animated and live-action television/film formats. The idea of presenting moral opposites in a narrative is ingrained within popular culture, and while *Joker* does so, it does it by shifting perspectives on the morals that these established characters are known to represent. Well-established characters from this universe, Bruce Wayne and Thomas Wayne, who have appeared in other narratives featuring the Batman and the Joker, are now presented in a different light. Bruce Wayne is still a child, and Thomas Wayne – Bruce’s father, potentially Arthur’s father also – is not the shining example of Gotham’s future. He is the opposite – a power-hungry industrialist with the ability to influence public policy.

However, since they both are so essential to the DC universe, their presence, though altered, is quite prominent. Thomas Wayne – an established, well-meaning industrialist who is more often than not known to have been the example of what Gotham should be – is instead cast in a negative role for this film. Wayne has been a distant presence in Arthur’s life for many years; his mother Penny would indicate that Thomas could possibly be his true father. However, Wayne treats him with violence and does not seem to hold much regard for the poor of the city either. Wayne influences Arthur’s transformation into the Joker, more so in this narrative than

in any other of the same universe – which is not to overshadow the Batman’s impact. As the film slowly moulds Arthur into the Joker, it simultaneously provides enough motive for the child Bruce to want to become the Batman. During the riots that break out in the city towards the end of the film, the famous scene of Thomas and Martha shot down in an alley is shown – depicted as a consequence of the Joker’s popularity in Gotham. The same night that the Joker rises, the Batman’s promise is made – their mirroring relationship is too important for the Joker’s own narrative to overshadow.

The mirroring relationship shared between the Batman and the Joker is essential to the mythos of these characters, and is one that every narrative touches upon. The idea is borrowed from the Gothic, as Smith finds in his analysis of Miller’s *The Dark Knight Rises*, stating that this idea of doubles has been implemented into the superhero narrative (253). The preoccupation with doubles and dualism characterises nineteenth-century Victorian Gothic, with works like *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Frankenstein* and multiple other works examining the trope of man’s dualism. While in *Jekyll and Hyde* and *Dorian Gray* the duality exists within the man itself, *Frankenstein* places the duality externally, with the characters acknowledging their relationship as the creature states ‘... my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrendous even from the very resemblance’ (Shelley 130). Freud viewed the double as ‘the uncanny harbinger of death’ (Freud 357), bringing in the ‘residues of a more primitive moment in the development of the subject (Mishra 294). The Joker’s identity has always been read in relation to that of the Batman’s, with Englehart stating succinctly, ‘the Batman lives on a razor’s edge, to be as sharp as he can, while the Joker lives out beyond Pluto, to be as huge as he can’ (xi). Ke Jinde finds that like his comic book counterparts, perhaps his performance of the Joker is a mask that Arthur wears, similar to how Bruce Wayne wears the cowl to become the Batman, Kal-El wears his glasses to become Clark Kent, and Bane wears his mask to become, well, Bane (453). What he interestingly notes,

however, is that the masks these men wear become the symbols, not the men themselves. Bruce Wayne as a playboy billionaire could never be the symbol for justice that the Batman is, Kal-El would never conform to living on Earth if not for the personality changes that being Clark Kent grants him. And as Bane says in *The Dark Knight Rises*, ‘No one cared who I was until I put on the mask’. The same could not be truer for Arthur. By himself, Arthur is a clown, ‘de-personalised and de-individualised as a person’ (Ke Jinde 456). It is through his make-up, his nonchalance for criminal activities and his identity as a nobody, that the Joker then emerges as either a symbol of evil or as a symbol of resistance (Ke Jinde 454).

This trope of wearing a mask to become the more basal version of the man was popularised famously in R. L. Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) where, upon drinking a potion, the respectable Dr Jekyll lets go of his socially accepted behaviour and essentially becomes less of a man, more of a beast. The trope was translated into the superhero narrative in the form of the Incredible Hulk,⁸¹ but echoes of the same can be found in almost all characters of the superhero narrative. Some wear masks to become better, some to become worse. In Stevenson’s novel, the Gothic trope of the double, or doppelganger, is also activated by Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, a highlight of nineteenth-century Victorian Gothic (Pykett ‘Sensation and the Fantastic in the Victorian Novel’ 225) as Jekyll creates a drug that bears ‘the stamp of lower elements in [his] soul’ (Stevenson 55). Oscar Wilde’s novella *The Picture of Dorian Gray* also theorises the double, featuring ‘a tale of the discontents of civilisation, and of the double bind of repression’ (Pykett ‘Sensation and the Fantastic in the Victorian Novel’ 226), which is most evident when Gray meets Lord Henry for the first time.⁸² Arthur, much like Dr Jekyll, removes himself of all barriers to become the true version of himself, which is noticeable in Phoenix’s performance of the role, and Fleck’s attitude upon meeting Murray

⁸¹ Harris’s article delves deep into this idea of Mr Hyde inspiring and conforming into the superhero genre and beyond (306).

⁸² Influenced by Lord Henry, Gray realizes ‘Youth is the only thing worth having’ (Wilde 33).

Franklin for the first time. In the creation of this new symbolic identity, the Joker becomes a perverse version of his own image, recalling the Creature's creation out of Victor Frankenstein's hands in Shelley's *Frankenstein*.⁸³ While Dr Jekyll eventually met his demise upon having taken too much of that potion—and thus allowing Hyde to take over the body more often than not, Fleck thrives upon becoming the monster, for finally having reached his true potential.⁸⁴ Now as the Joker, he walks and talks to people with much more ease, does not look into the mirror for his true self and is able to dance with no one to stop him.

Joker and Gotham City

The city of Gotham is a character of its own in this film. Uricchio writes that Gotham City becomes more valuable as the source of the Batman franchise's iteration, with the Batman's origin narrative establishing 'the link between character and setting, defining forever the nature of Gotham' (120). In this film, more so than in previous iterations of the Batman's narrative, Gotham City and the visual mise-en-scène of the city perform another layer of narrative in describing Arthur's struggles. The city itself haunts people, seemingly devoid of any natural sunlight. The buildings are too tall, transport is too tiring and, as a result, its citizens are constantly wary. There are garbage strikes, 'super rats' and cuts in funding for social services. This again is highly reminiscent of the Victorian Gothic texts, where 'the modern city—industrial, gloomy and labyrinthine—is the locus of horror, violence and corruption' (Botting *Gothic*, 105). London is often the location of horror, described as 'a district of some city in a nightmare' (Stevenson 23), or as 'this gray, monstrous London of ours, with its myriads of people, its splendid sinners and sordid sins' (Wilde 32).

Fleck is shown visiting a state-employed counsellor who asks all the 'right' questions without actually being of any help to him. In the first meeting, she asks Arthur for his journal

⁸³ Frankenstein states 'I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart' (Shelley 45).

⁸⁴ This line of analysis could be extended to form its own study, highlighting the similarities between Dr Jekyll/Arthur and Edward Hyde/The Joker.

and, seeing disturbing jokes ('I hope my death makes more cents than my life'), changes the topic. He says that he told her about launching a career in stand-up comedy, but she denies this. Arthur is convinced that he did tell her, but she probably was not paying attention. In a later scene when Arthur meets her again, this time after killing the Wall Street employees and causing a social stir, he mentions that he feels like people are finally starting to notice him, to which she does not reply. Instead, she talks about budget cuts, due to which Arthur will no longer be able to meet her or get his medication. At Arkham State Hospital, Arthur confides in a file clerk that he has done 'some bad shit'. The clerk does not know what to say, so he denies any responsibility and says, 'You know, they got programmes ...', which have had no effect on Arthur. As Ke Jinde notes, the political decline in Gotham is clearly shown in the way that the ruling and political elite are completely disconnected from the rest of society (448).

The elite of the city, shown through the shining example of Thomas Wayne, are equally disconnected. In fact, Wayne's aura is basically shown to be a part of Penny Fleck's delusions. For Penny, and by extension audiences for all these years, Thomas Wayne is 'the only one who could save the city'. Penny believes that because of the work she did for Wayne thirty years ago, he would help them out of their poor living conditions. She writes letters to him and waits for replies to her letters, all in vain. After the subway murders, when Wayne comes on TV, he maintains the image of a corporate leader who did not personally know the victims, but still says, 'Like all Wayne employees, past and present, we're all family', which Penny holds on to. To see Thomas Wayne call the poor 'clowns', speak of those who go without as 'those who haven't [made anything of themselves]' and punch Arthur in the face is a shock, but that is the Gotham that this film is taking us to. This city has poor people, poor father figures and poor men with neurological issues that make them laugh at inopportune moments of discomfort or pain.

Arthur escapes from this harsh world by completely immersing himself in the television programmes he watches with his mother, specifically the *Live! With Murray Franklin* show. Howell aptly notes that Fleck's transformation into the Joker is influenced by the media he has immersed himself in (78–79). He reinvents himself through 'his laboured observation and emulation of male comedians and stars' (Howell 80). The television in his home is his window to the outside world, and offers him what Howell calls the 'ultimate affirmation', that of an appreciative audience and that of being transformed (79). Arthur relates his experiences through the media he consumes. He listens to a song about a man named Carnival, relating it to his own clown name. This would lead to the assumption that any music/song/audio playing through the film must be diegetic, therefore adding to Arthur's narrative experiences through the film.

After the subway murders are committed, the media showcase repeated viewings of stories related to the murders. Newspaper stands feature articles about the murders on the front pages, and even Thomas Wayne responds to the murders. This was the validation he wanted; he realises that his crimes gain more affirmation than anything else he has done. There are demonstrations and protests against Arthur's enemies, with the masses wearing his make-up, his clown face. The last straw is when his stand-up clip from Pogo's Comedy Club is shown on the *Live! With Murray Franklin* show. Arthur has idolised Murray, and even dreamed of him being a father figure (as mentioned earlier). When Murray ridicules him on his show, making a joke out of him on the very platform that Arthur looks for validation, Arthur gives up any pretence. He seeks comfort not from warm blankets, but from a cold refrigerator. When he gets the call to be on Murray's show, he accepts, but it soon becomes clear that he knows why he is being called on the show. It is at this point that Arthur embraces the Joker. He sits in the middle of the empty bench on the bus, instead of taking a seat by the window and looking

at the world through the glass. He reveals to the file clerk that he is not affected by his crimes. He murders his mother, cutting off any ties to the person he used to be.

Parts of the same city eventually celebrate who he becomes. As the Joker reveals himself on television and riots break out in the city, it is the clown face that the Joker wears that has inspired these citizens to take up arms against the elite. These rioters celebrate the Joker, performing acts of violence in this spree such as overturning police cars and murdering Thomas and Martha Wayne – leading to the birth of the Batman. The city has always been an essential element of the Batman's mythos, constantly fighting against the evil that was brewing inside (Uricchio 128). In this film, evil is an essential element of the city to such an extent that there is almost no hope for a better Gotham. This, however, contrasts most Gothic narratives where 'all that is abjected is thrown under', 'cast off into a figure or figures criminalised or condemned by people in authority' and 'subjected to their gaze and the patterns of social normalcy they enforce' (Hogle 'Introduction', 7). This subjugation either leads to the criminalised figure's destruction by their own hand, or some sort of 'spiritual inoculation' (Williams 103–104).

Becoming the Joker ... Once Again?

The Joker was created due to a variety of influences from different media, as was detailed in the previous sections. Over the years, writers of different comic runs and films have taken artistic licence with the character, continuing to push the limits of what the Joker represents – with *Joker* being one among them. As mentioned in the Introduction section of this chapter, a major influence on the Joker's creation was Connor Veidt's performance as Gwynplaine in *The Man Who Laughs*, a 1928 film by Paul Leni adapted from Victor Hugo's novel of the same name. The film follows the story of a disfigured Gwynplaine, who joins a travelling circus and, through a few coincidences, finds out that he is in fact the heir to the English throne. His disfigurement is one of the marks against his ascension to the throne, but the tale's focus on

Gwynplaine's grimacing smile is in stark contrast with his noble mind – a theme common in Hugo's novels.⁸⁵ As it occurs with Gwynplaine and Quasimodo in *Notre-Dame de Paris*, the physical bodies of these characters become the sources of drama defined by Hugo owing to their ability to 'illuminate at the same time the interior and the exterior of mankind' (Hugo 368).

This film being one of the major inspirations for the Joker's initial character design holds more weight when considering the more recent interpretation of the character. *Joker* presents a narrative similar to Gwynplaine's in this rewritten origin for the Clown Prince of Crime. Gwynplaine is the bearer of a disfigured face, one that becomes monstrous to onlookers, and thereby enables him to join the circus troupe. His grimacing smile is not one that comes naturally, but rather one that has been forcibly inscribed onto his face. Similarly, Arthur's laugh is not one of joy but is a painful medical condition. He uses that laugh to perform as a clown for his job, but some days he has to force a smile onto his face. He is still socially inferior, even among the clowns. He is unable to prevent himself from attacking children, and unable to stand up for himself in front of his boss or his colleagues. However, the characters are not the same, a difference that stems from the varied understanding of the concept of 'grotesque' that Hugo had. While Gwynplaine is offered a chance to rise up from his socially inferior standing and he refuses, Arthur rises to receive the recognition he feels is owed to him. The point of Gwynplaine's narrative was to show how 'bodies scarred by ugliness contrast with the character's noble minds' (Jeanneret 29), whereas Arthur's narrative would always lead to him becoming the Joker.

Hugo used such ideas as the grotesque, implementing their ability to 'on the one hand create the abnormal and the horrible, on the other the comic and the burlesque' in multiple works

⁸⁵ Jeanneret's chapter focuses on the grotesque, Gwynplaine and Quasimodo's monstrosity, and Hugo's use of 'Drama of the Body' and is an interesting source when analysing *Joker* (29).

(347). *The Man Who Laughs*, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, *Les Misérables* and other such texts highlight the plight that such socially inferior grotesque characters live through. Cornwell notes that the grotesque has historically also been applied to ‘a disturbingly eccentric fictional character’ (175). The satiric blending of the comic and the serious, with distorted imagery, in the works of Gogol, brings about the essence of the comic grotesque – which is an aesthetic we find Arthur leaning towards as he discovers himself (Cornwell 175). *Joker* works to highlight Arthur’s status as a grotesque monster time and again through the visuals of his physical body. While stretching his leather clown boots, Arthur’s skinny, bony back is highlighted; his painful laugh is felt in full, with the way Arthur tries multiple times to stop but cannot; he has to pull his cheeks into a smile rather than have them stretch naturally.

It is here that the differences in the understanding of the grotesque become clear, especially in Gwynplaine and Arthur. While for Hugo, the grotesque is applied to ‘artistic images of the ugly, linking it with the aesthetically monstrous and extremes of the comic, or preferably both in combination’ (Cornwell 175), the grotesque in *Joker* leans more towards the Gothic understanding of the term. As mentioned earlier, the Gothic grotesque relates to the abject, a term identified by Julia Kristeva as referring to ‘a massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness’ (2), ‘what disturbs identity, system order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules’ (4). The Gothic grotesque thus manifests in images of horror, of ‘the corpse, whole and mutilated’, of ‘an array of bodily wastes such as blood, vomit, saliva, sweat, tears and putrefying flesh’ (Creed 10). While for Hugo the grotesque functions as a ‘dynamic category’ to ‘legitimate a literary practice which embraces the bodily’ (Jeanneret 27), the Gothic grotesque serves to ‘alienate and unhinge those who encounter them’ (Kayser 73, qtd. in Hurley 141).

Upon such analysis of *The Man Who Laughs* and *Joker*, and keeping in mind the variety of sources of inspiration that comic writers used for their material, the imagery of Gwynplaine

seems appropriate to function as a comic book supervillain. It might have just been the visual that was the source of inspiration in the 1930s, however, this new interpretation allows for Hugo's text to mean more to the Joker. The Joker is essentially a grotesque figure and is socially inferior to the elites of Gotham city, yet the Joker is not pure of heart and noble in mind. The Joker's history of playing with narratives and emotions makes Arthur's transformation by the end of the film seem inevitable. Of course, there were multiple other factors that aided, including his mental illness, but Arthur's destiny to become the Joker was set in stone by virtue of having existed in that specific comic book film.

Concluding Remarks

The film ends with the Joker in what is understood to be Arkham State Hospital with a counsellor. The scene begins with Arthur's cry-laugh, similar to how his first scene with the state-appointed counsellor went, but it does not seem half as painful now. The Joker does not try to control his laughter anymore, he lets it out. When asked what the joke is, he tells her, 'You wouldn't get it', and then begins to sing 'That's Life', a song that was the title track to Murray Franklin's show. This scene cuts to the Joker walking away from the room with bloody footprints, into the sunlight. The counsellor is assumed to have been killed by the Joker, now fully actualised. The joke he was thinking about could be read to be the plot of the film itself: when a mentally ill person went on a shooting spree and was glorified for it. The Joker might have found that funny, and might have realised that many would not.

This film worked hard to present a pitiful existence to all its citizens. All the characters in the film are classified into two clear categories – the inflictors and the inflicted. The inflictors represent the elite, who are all embodied through Thomas Wayne and Murray Franklin. The inflicted are everyone else. The government officials are helpless to do any real good, the blue-collar workers have personal issues that will not allow them a comfortable life – Arthur's boss is under pressure from his boss and so on – and Arthur himself cannot seem to help but be

weak. If the film were made with no ties to the comic book characters, if it were a film about a mentally ill man named John Smith Jr., whose father John Smith Sr. would not acknowledge his existence, and goes on a killing spree under the name The Rictus Killer (or some variation of the same), it would be a politically intriguing film and John Smith Jr. would be an appropriately pitiable villain. But, since the film draws from a long-lived myth, things get a little more complicated. The Joker is known to audiences as a supervillain. He is known to be an agent of chaos, a court jester, a trickster, the one who will burn down millions of dollars because he just ‘wants to watch the world burn’.

It was a bold move when Moore and Bolland gave a possible origin for the Joker in *The Killing Joke*, making him a pitiable character who just wants some medicine for his pregnant wife, but gets caught in unfortunate circumstances. For Seller, ‘Joker embodies a repeating, recursive identity’, one that with continuous repetition loses sight of its origin (4). But what we find instead is that the Joker is known for being a villain with a blank slate. He keeps his origin story ‘multiple choice’ as he admitted in one of his origin stories, but his ideology and his motivations are stated clearly depending on the storyline or the version of the Joker that the story demands. His brand of supervillainy is the unknown, the fact that at any time, one cannot know what exactly his plans are. As has been mentioned earlier, he represents the chaos that disrupts the Batman’s ordered and logical outlook of the world. With a character that represents chaos as much as he does, it makes sense that he would be a blank slate.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the Joker would have to be a villain similar to the shark from *Jaws*, a mysterious unknown entity with no explanation. To become the Joker, Arthur had to eliminate all that tied him to the painful world. As he begins to realise that eliminating the things that hurt him does not affect him as much as ‘it’s supposed to’, rather that he feels like himself, he realises that this is the way to become his truest self – to be a blank slate, to represent the chaos of an ordered world, to be the Joker. Pyle states clearly of this

origin story that ‘Joker has no philosophy because he has no father, no God, no moral centre ... Joker embraces the emptiness that tortured Arthur’ (Pyle).

At the end of the day, it becomes immaterial how the Joker became the Joker, or what instances led to his supervillainy. The Batman does not ever care about why his villains became so, unless their backstory provides a clue to defeating them in that story. For him, the villains he has to deal with on a daily basis are a nuisance, something he *has* to deal with in order to make Gotham a better city. His apathetic attitude towards the criminals helps him remain stoic in his ways of dispensing with the criminals, yet still ensuring never to lose control and kill. This is most evident in *The Dark Knight*, when the Batman decides to focus on eradicating the mob rather than deal with the Joker. The Joker has been a threat to this Batman for a while – his calling card is revealed at the end of the first film, *Batman Begins*. But the Joker is not the Batman’s priority until called out by name, until the Joker has to taunt the Batman and threaten the deaths of innocents in his attempt to reveal the Batman’s secret identity. It is only at this point that the Batman takes the Joker seriously. It is his increasing violence and personal attacks that draw the Batman into the Joker’s games, leading up to eventually losing the person he loved.⁸⁶

This brand of supervillainy, which comes with no way of being understood but with a serious threat to life, is a strain seen emerging across various media over many years. Early Gothic novels worked on exaggeration as a means of conveying the underlying horror of the everyday world (Punter, *The Literature of Terror Vol I*, 91). The Joker is a character who reveals the horrors in the lives people live, in the stories we tell ourselves to comfort ourselves. That our governments care for us, that they occupy their posts with the best intentions. That the elite of our cities truly mean when they say that they work to improve our urban spaces.

⁸⁶ A similar strain is found in ‘A Death in the Family’ comic where Batman and Robin (Jason Todd) are drawn in to meet Jason’s mother, but instead are confronted by the Joker who kills Jason, taking away Batman’s companion.

That our families are our own and love us. The Joker brings these to the cusp of their limits, testing how long they can hold under strain, exaggerating their stories until the ‘truth’, the real horror, is revealed to all.

Also, for the Joker, ‘[t]error is not a nightmare, but the freezing touch of reality’, something Punter attributes to early Gothic novels as a characteristic trait (*The Literature of Terror Vol 1*, 99). The film opens with a world distressingly similar to the real world.⁸⁷ It opens in a time and space – New York in the 1980s – that is known to have been a time of tumult. Phillips’s inspirations for this film, *The King of Comedy* and *Taxi Driver*, are both relevant to help understand why the narrative of *Joker* is so effective. By recreating a world similar to one that has been established by other films, giving a well-known supervillain a mental illness and making spectators question the superheroes, Phillips creates a narrative that questions just how wonderful a world it is that these characters inhabit. The film structures its storyworld through intertextual references, to the storyworlds established in films like *Taxi Driver*, *The King of Comedy*, *Dog Day Afternoon* (dir. Sidney Lumet, 1975), *Serpico* (dir. Sidney Lumet, 1973), and others (Fernández-Moreno and Salvadó-Romero 25).⁸⁸ Since the superhero narrative operates on intertextuality as a ‘process of remembering’ (Harvey34), reverting to Gotham/New York to a time of ‘urban decline’ adds to the narrative (Corkin 617). The media scare *Joker* generated, warning viewers of the riots that could begin after this film’s release provides further evidence to the idea that the fictional film could have violent ramifications outside that fictional world. The real world could become the Gotham that Arthur Fleck lives

⁸⁷ Gotham city has been documented as being ‘a distillation of everything that’s dark, moody and frightening about New York’ (O’Neil, qtd in Peterson), making this version of Gotham city a close mirror to reality and the socio-economic conditions that *Taxi Driver* and *King of Comedy* also present.

⁸⁸ Fernández-Moreno and Salvadó-Romero discuss in detail the implications of setting the narrative of *Joker* in this specific time and space in their chapter titled ‘Joker and Gotham City: Identity correspondence. The political value in the evocation of New York City in the 1970s and the imaginary of the new Hollywood thriller’ (24-35).

in, and someone going through bad enough circumstances with an untreated mental illness could very well become the Joker.⁸⁹

Janine Little looks at Arthur's monstrous masculinity using Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. This comparison between a Gothic novel and a comic-book film aids this chapter, particularly when she says,

Both *Joker* and *Frankenstein* make the monster a meaning machine. That is, the monster is a process of crisis management for the socio-economically comfortable ... they are intended to be read as humanely violent, understandably indignant and entitled in their anger. (174)

Both the texts are reflections of the times they were brought out of, both had a message of empathy at the end of the story. Both narratives invite audiences to question who the real monster is by the end of the story. But just as Victor Frankenstein is proven to be the original instigator, the Joker is very clearly the supervillain, much empathy and understanding cannot be afforded to him. By separating Arthur Fleck from the Joker, which is what the film shows as an ongoing process, spectators are able to see that while the times are tough, the Joker is tougher. He is the monster that Arthur Fleck has to learn to grow into. Arthur is a creation of the monster; a story being told to audiences. Arthur is the mirror held up to the real world, and to Gotham as well. And the final joke is that no matter what happens, the Joker emerges victorious in every version of his origin, just for having existed.⁹⁰

To summarise this chapter, the Joker's inherent villainous mode of operating is amplified by his being a mobile signifier, as every iteration of the character has signified new anxieties faced by the Batman and his extending Bat-family. The Joker has simultaneously

⁸⁹ Scholars like Doidge and Rosenfeldt, Kuryel, Ghorab and Harize, and Tsaliki and Chronaki have written articles detailing how the fictional text of *Joker* has incited populist revolt and violence in multiple countries; these essays are chapters in Redmond's anthology on the film (Doidge and Rosenfeldt 65, Ghorab and Harize 78, Tsaliki 90, Chronaki 103).

⁹⁰ To clarify this statement, this thesis acknowledges that even though the Batman fights the Joker multiple times, and always seems to overpower the Joker, the Killer Clown's existence has enough of an impact upon the Dark Knight to fundamentally review his principles. This adds further credence to the idea of the Batman and the Joker being essential for the other. The longer the Joker remains an active threat to the Batman, and society at large, the more influential capacity he accumulates.

represented the cultural anxieties reflected back onto spectators, for whom the origin story of the superhero and supervillain has been given utmost importance in multiple superhero narratives. By claiming a ‘multiple choice’ method of telling his origins and never revealing the full truth, the Joker remains an echo of the Gothic unknown and the fear it presented. In the film *Joker* in particular, by presenting a narrative of the Joker’s rise to power through the failings of Arthur’s world, the film’s Gothic setting in a paranoid Gotham City, the grotesque display of Arthur’s mental illness and his physicality, Arthur’s monstrosity is revealed, having thus transformed him into the Joker.

Just as noted in the first chapter, this chapter finds the Gothic to be instrumental in ensuring the Joker’s prominent narrative presence in the film *Joker*, displaying yet another example of a film based on the superhero narrative placing the supervillain at the forefront of the narrative. More so than Thanos, the Joker’s mutability is an essential trait of his villainy, making the idea of the mobile signifier more applicable to the Clown Prince of Crime. The next chapter analyses a character who was created in association with the Joker, but who managed to break away from a relatively one-dimensional reading of the character. Harley Quinn, created as the Joker’s romantic interest, has displayed a stark variation in terms of her supervillainy. The next chapter looks at how this variation takes place, its implications on her supervillainy and whether the term is applicable to her at all.

Chapter 3 - Harley Quinn and the Female Gothic Plot

Introduction

The scene begins with a woman in a cage, wearing a tunic the colour of her skin that is tied together rather than worn in one piece. The song ‘You Don’t Own Me’ (SAYGRACE ft. G-Eazy 0:30-1:05) plays as a diegetic introduction for the woman who, through the rest of the film, wears a jacket that declares her the ‘Property of J’. This is Harley Quinn’s introduction into live-action film. Such ironies seem to form a major part of this character’s franchise. When first introduced as a henchwoman for the Joker, artist and writer Paul Dini states that he needed someone to bring a cake into the room in a 1992 episode titled ‘Joker’s Favor’ of *Batman: The Animated Series* (henceforth *BTAS*), and having the Joker do that seemed boring. Inspired by a character, funnily enough played by Arleen Sorkin⁹¹ in *Days of Our Lives*, Dini set his henchwoman up to be a funny woman in a jester costume with few lines of dialogue, intending for her to act as ‘a foil’ for the Joker, to ‘bring out some of [the Joker’s] personality traits’ (qtd. in Murphy). This ‘hench-wench’, as she is so lovingly called, has ended up becoming a neo-noir feminist icon (a term further explored later in the text). Quinn’s characterisation as a young woman liberating herself from a bad relationship is one that women look upon to substantiate the belief that their own struggles can be overcome (Bray 41).

Harley entered the world at a time when narratives featuring women as dangerous threats were quite prevalent. Multiple villains on screen have had their respective henchwomen, like Irma Blunt in *On Her Majesty’s Secret Service* (1969) and Gazelle in *Kingsman: The Secret Service* (2014), but so did action heroes have their lady sidekicks, like Rita Vrataski in *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014). Some women were heroes by their own merit, like the *Kill Bill*

⁹¹ Sorkin ended up voicing the character for a long time.

series, the *Charlie's Angels* series and the *Alien* films to name but a few, entering the action film space to eventually be dubbed 'figurative males' by both critics and scholars (Brown, *Dangerous Curves* 40).⁹² The term is an inherently politicised idea, with an underlying assumption of what masculinity and femininity signify and what performance of such roles looks like. Since Mulvey's seminal essay, 'Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema' (1975), the 'pleasure in looking' is attributed directly to the 'active male gaze' that 'projects its phantasy onto the female figure which is styled' in accordance with its passivity (11). For Mulvey, 'women are simultaneously looked at and displayed', connoting '*to-be-looked-at-ness*' (11, original emphasis). The labelling of action heroines as 'masculinised female bodies' (Tasker 149) then adds more chaos into the strict boundaries by which such 'active/male' and 'passive/female' (Mulvey 11) are delineated, in that they 'enact both masculinity and femininity' (Brown, *Dangerous Curves* 41).

Harley is not the first comic-related villainess/anti-hero⁹³ to have made it to the big screen; *Barb Wire* (1996) was released earlier. In joining the ranks of action heroines, Harley's body becomes a subject of analysis in terms of the costumes depicted and the shifting objectification that takes place across the live-action films. Just as with *Barb Wire*, Harley Quinn is initially shown to be 'within the symbolic realm of the dominatrix by both breaking down and exploiting the boundaries between the sexes' (Brown, *Dangerous Curves* 42). Her characterisation later shifts to the *femme castratrice* of woman's revenge films, 'who exists in discourses of myth, legend, religion and art but whose image has been repressed in Freudian psychoanalytic theory' for challenging 'Freud's view that man fears woman because she is

⁹² Brown discusses in his book *Dangerous Curves* how some of the first scholars of female action heroes were identified as 'transformed males' (Clover 52), 'masculinised female bodies' (Tasker 149) and 'Dirty Harriets' (Kaplan 50–57).

⁹³ The multiplicity with which Harley is defined and the various terms used to define her performance of heroism and villainy are terms discussed and clarified later in the text. This only adds to her potential to be read as multiple, rather than singular.

castrated' (Creed 127). Quinn was introduced as a villainess madly in love with one of the most dangerous villains created, who later evolved into a sexualised woman who cracks one-liners and saves people when forced to. The shift that her characterisation undertakes reads similarly to the multiple narratives of 'mad women' in popular culture (Caputi 6), who have existed since the creation of patriarchal myths, into a postfeminist Gothic creation, enacting a process of 'exploring more than defining' (Brabon and Genz 1). By belonging to multiple spaces of intellectual thought, she ends up being an amalgam of all these spaces, with the ability to become 'someone who could be anything they wanted' and essentially become the property of us all (Jackson 27).

This chapter analyses Harley Quinn, who was intended to be a minor villain. The previously established concepts of the mobile signifier and the Gothic framework in the introduction to this thesis are complicated upon considering Quinn as a subject of analysis, blurring the understanding of what the supervillain's function is in the superhero narrative. As has been previously established, the supervillain's functions as a mobile signifier have been based on a gendered idea, as representatives of the Symbolic order. Quinn's own gender and her difficult relationship with members of another gender are an essential part of her narrative, enacting a survivor's narrative in which she successfully evades the villain who attempts and succeeds in seducing her. Thus, Quinn's multiple appearances across media platforms and variations in appearance, while still displaying a cohesive narrative, are not in relation to her displays of villainy, but rather indicative of her journey to 'independence' and 'empowerment'. Whether or not these ideals are achieved is part of the discussion that forms this chapter. However, it is prudent to begin the analysis with definitions of the terms and framework to understand Harley Quinn's function as a supervillain.

As has been established in the Introduction, the Female Gothic plot becomes a tool to examine the gendered tension between the phallic mobile signifier and Harley Quinn's multiplicity. This chapter follows the work of Anne Williams in *Art of Darkness*, whose psychoanalytic understanding of the 'Female Gothic plot' aids in the framing of Harley Quinn's narrative (102).⁹⁴ Here, the narrator, or the gaze of the narrative, becomes the most distinguishing factor. In the two previous chapters, the narrators, reliable or not, were men and thus their narrative arcs were mirrored through those of most superhero narratives. When analysing a character like Harley Quinn, the narrator shifts between films – displaying a shift in the narrative from a Male Gothic plot (in *Suicide Squad*) to a Female Gothic plot (*Birds of Prey*). Quinn's multiplicity in characterisation follows the multiple Gothic heroines who 'manifest instability, that refusal to be *one thing* that is so troubling to patriarchal order' (Williams 117, original emphasis).

This instability presented by the woman is present as a trope in multiple horror films as well, with the conception of the 'monstrous feminine' presenting the woman in the narrative as 'shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject' (Creed 1). In particular, the myth of the woman as castrator and the witch emerges frequently (Campbell 73), in which the 'tooth vagina' of the woman or 'the vagina that castrates' must be tamed by the hero figure (Creed 2).⁹⁵ Such myths once again prioritise the patriarchal superiority of the Oedipal myth, in which 'the woman's

⁹⁴ Williams's study is not without relevant critique, with an overt generalization by aligning 'all things other, all things repressed, and all things corporeal, with the female' (Craciun 220) and the centralisation of Radcliffian heroines and plots in her thesis (Wallace 31). While this thesis has understood multiple elements as potentially representing the other, the characterisation of Harley Quinn is considerably varied as this chapter will prove. Further, while Radcliffe proves a valuable starting point to locate the Female Gothic, her works are not central to this chapter's analysis of Harley Quinn.

⁹⁵ The myth of the witch exists in the 'phallic mother', a motif depicted in 'the long fingers and nose of the witch' (Campbell 73). The phallic mother exists in contemporary popular culture through figures who have been 'symbolically castrated ... robbed unjustly of their rightful destiny' (Creed 122). Their violent urges arise from 'a failure to lead a "normal" life' in possession of friends and family. She remains unfulfilled through the narrative, and is inevitably punished for her transgressions (Creed 122–123). Examples of this figure include the heroines in *Fatal Attraction* (1987), *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* (1992), *Single White Female* (1992) and *Poison Ivy* (1992).

“lack” produces the penis as the mark of human fullness and the phallus as symbolic presence’ (Creed 110). Because she is ‘castrated’ she represents lack relative to the Symbolic Order, which man has the right to represent (Creed 110). The inevitability in patriarchal readings of the monstrous woman reveals the instability of the Freudian and Lacanian Symbolic Order and the resulting construction of culture (Creed 161). Instead, the woman as castrator, or the *femme castratrice*’s narrative, challenges the centring of the Oedipal myth. Just as with the Female Gothic, the castrating woman is presented primarily in slasher films and enacts her revenge on men who have raped, abused or exploited her in some way (Creed 123, 126). This chapter finds Harley Quinn enacting her revenge narrative as castrator, which will be analysed in detail.

This chapter begins with Caputi’s analysis of how myths about women and subsequent revisions of those myths have created monsters out of goddesses. Caputi’s analysis is based on the idea that ‘[p]atriarchal proponents invariably universalise their system, claiming that nothing else ever did or could exist’ (7). Offering a historical perspective, Caputi’s text traces the myth of gynocentric origins, providing a feminist perspective to reclaim a past and rework those symbols, thereby generating ‘a resistant, nonpatriarchal consciousness and alternative path of *becoming*, for both women and men’ (10, original emphasis). This process of repressed myths brought to the forefront proves particularly useful when discussing *Birds of Prey*, in which Quinn begins the films by re-introducing herself and clarifying her role as the Joker’s ‘henchwoman’/girlfriend.

Understanding the various incarnations that Quinn’s character has undergone places her as a part of the Female Gothic, while expanding the discussion to other areas as well. Concurrently, this chapter finds instances in the novels of Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Ann Radcliffe where Gothic heroines were afforded the foundations of female agency that gave contemporary characters like Harley Quinn the freedom to find security in their identities as

villainesses. Here, agency is understood as a term that has indicated different powers and possibilities for women over the years, and is defined in relation to the socioeconomic status of actants under analysis. For example, agency for Emily St Aubert in Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* cannot mean the same thing as agency for Harley Quinn, simply based on the temporal context out of which both these characters emerge, and yet agency exists in both texts. The shifting meanings of terms such as agency, gaze and more are necessary to contextualise, which are delineated below.

This chapter next explores the gender politics behind the female action hero, the emergence of the femme fatales and the impact such images have had on bringing Harley Quinn to the silver screen. As discussed earlier, the gaze has historically been predominantly that of the active/male, which has inevitably led to a presentation of Quinn with 'sexual allure', as Inness finds that 'by making women sexually desirable and stressing that they are attracted to men, the films assure viewers that women are sexual objects' (69). Multiple scholars have studied the female action hero in various genres of fictional texts, whether they be written or visual. Scholars like Kate Ellis, Carol Margaret Davison and Ellen Moers (among multiple others) have discussed the Gothic heroine, specifically in terms of the relationship these heroines would have with their physical bodies. As they find, the Female Gothic would feature Gothic heroines who participated in 'physical heroics' (Moers 131), and as a result would be freed from 'their essentialising ties to reproduction' (Ellis 470). When looking at science-fiction/action and horror films (indirect and direct descendants of the Gothic tradition respectively), scholars like Tasker, Kaplan, Kristeva, Creed and Clover have all contributed to the discussion. Quinn's physicality is an asset for the character, used to seduce or attack as required of her circumstances – a reading that makes her decidedly postfeminist (Negra and Tasker, 'Introduction' 4).

The postfeminist politics is tied deeply to Quinn's objectification, as all feminist histories are. Described as encompassing 'a set of assumptions, widely disseminated within popular media forms, having to do with the "pastness" of feminism', postfeminist ideology is one that has emerged in the 1990s, in response to the second wave's austere motivations (Tasker and Negra, 'Introduction' 1). Postfeminist culture exists in contemporary popular culture by responding to 'a selectively defined feminism' (Negra and Tasker, 'Introduction' 1), in order 'to emphasise that it is no longer needed, that it is a spent force' (McRobbie 28). With the rhetoric of 'choice', postfeminist discourse emphasises educational and professional opportunities available, without considering economic disparities and socio-cultural impediments that some might suffer more than others (Tasker and Negra, 'Introduction' 2). Thus, in working with a capitalist culture, postfeminist ideology works with media industries to 'evoke feminism' in 'self-consciously sexist' media, only for it to be summarily dismissed as 'no longer necessary' (McRobbie 33). In the context of Quinn's function as a villain, particularly in *Suicide Squad*, Quinn is presented as objectified with no 'agency or the ability to control how [she is] seen by people – or, in fact, how [she is] treated by them' (Paasonen et al. 1). This chapter then explores Quinn's objectification; in the three live-action interpretations of her characterisation, the chapter explores if this objectification shifts, and if so how.

Finally, converging on Quinn herself, this chapter analyses the various lives and interpretations that have made Harley Quinn. As mentioned earlier and will be further elaborated later, Quinn's role in the Batman's mythos was meant to be limited. What was initially an afterthought grew into a major property owned by WB, and the progress of this narrative process forms a major part of the chapter. From the television screen to the comics, to the film theatres, Quinn's characterisation has undergone drastic changes, which this chapter uncovers, highlighting instances where her status shifts from being a villainess into an action heroine. Through this process, Quinn's own self 'realisation' 'enlarges her world, opens up the

possibility of discovering good, and of finding what she seeks' (Williams 145). Quinn thus enacts the Female Gothic plot, always othered by her Lacanian lack but, in *Birds of Prey*, able to enact her revenge narrative and embody the monstrous threat of the castrating heroine (Creed 110, 126).

Lastly, the chapter aims to locate Harley Quinn among multiple debates, finally concluding that the multiplicity of her identity is what defines her character. This chapter analyses *Birds of Prey* (2019) as the main text featuring Harley Quinn. The film is narratively all about Harley, tracking her circumstances after having been dumped by her abusive boyfriend, the Joker. Quinn finds her own place in Gotham City's crime ring, acquaints herself with a group of women who support her as much as she supports them. Through this process, Harley is finally able to embrace the identity that was made for her without the emotional violence of the Joker's abuse – she becomes a mixture of multiple ideas and tropes, representing varying ideas as they fit into her world.

Historical Context: Female Gothic, the Femme Fatale and Postfeminism

Understanding Harley's brand of villainy (or lack thereof) would require understanding the role that her gender has on villainy in general.⁹⁶ Popular culture, as has been discussed by this thesis in the Introduction with examples from the Gothic mode and the superhero narrative, is packed with 'ancient and contemporary folkloric images and narratives' (Caputi 4). Through the passage of time and the introduction of structures and systems which took hold through an 'invention of hierarchy', certain myths were repressed, with women particularly finding 'their roles, their public behaviour, and their sexuality defined by men or male dominated institutions' (Lerner 121). Jane Caputi's extensive study of the monsters created out of goddesses traces the

⁹⁶ When introduced, Harley is depicted as identifying as a heteronormative female. However, as her relationship with fellow villainess Poison Ivy was developed, Harley is now depicted to be identifying as a bisexual.

history of how goddesses were villainised by patriarchal cultures, splitting the female self and the female deities (13). She quotes Anzaldúa and finds that '[t]hey divided her who had been complete, who possessed both upper (light) and underworld (dark) aspects ... into chaste virgins and ... *putas*, into Beauties and Beasts' (Caputi 13).

Popular literature did not shy away from the monstrous woman either, introducing the bitch. Sarah Appleton Aguiar finds this monstrous presence in Greek tragedy, biblical incarnations and classical and cultural mythologies as well. For Aguiar, 'the bitch, by her very definition is the embodiment of female evil: the foil of literature's icons of morality and the scourge of the male hero' (5). Qualities that characterise this archetype include, she finds, 'an appropriation of the male sphere, a seemingly in-congruent knowledge of evil and, a lack of moral and sexual virtue' (5). Aguiar allows that a variety of factors are involved in the making of the bitch, these being psychological, social and economic. She finds that the bitch often presents as a dispossessed individual, 'whose struggles for selfhood and agency necessitate drastic measures ... The bitch often refuses to accede to the demands of the patriarchal society; she develops a strength that assists her in overcoming her victimhood' (Aguiar 11).

Shifting forward to the seventeenth century, Gothic novels were becoming more popular, featuring narratives of young women trapped in massive castles, often on the run or in hiding from a villainous father figure. As Punter and Byron note, these narratives would later be delineated into two categories – the Male and Female Gothic (278). As they find, the two differed primarily in the ways that the relationship between the protagonist and the dominant spaces were depicted (Punter and Byron 278). The Female Gothic would feature narratives where, rather than focusing on the male protagonist's attempt to infiltrate a socially encompassing interior, these narratives introduced a female protagonist's struggles to escape from the confining interior. These narratives would have the same transgressive male, who was now the primary threat in the heroine's idyllic life (Punter and Byron 279). One stark difference

between the two plots is that in the Male Gothic plot, the heroine's role 'is inseparable from her identity as a sexual being, either as a subject or object' (Williams 105). A stark feature of the Female Gothic plot is the shift in gaze, since now without the burden of lack as presented in the Oedipal crisis, this gaze 'has not been generated through conflict ... she has a different relation to her own mother and to that cultural (m)other repressed in her access to the Symbolic' (Williams 139).

In particular, Punter and Byron note how Ann Radcliffe's work would focus on the heroine and her experiences, the journey these protagonists would take leading to the assumption of some agency or power or a search for an absent mother (279). Moers's analysis of Radcliffean novels homes in on this point, finding that these heroines 'could enjoy all the adventures and alarms that masculine heroes had long experienced' (131). Modleski further finds that 'Gothics, like Harlequins, perform the function of giving expression to women's hostility towards men while simultaneously allowing them to repudiate it' (67). Apart from the obvious similarity in the name itself then, Quinn's narrative follows a similar trend as the Female Gothic plot. Particularly in the analysis of *Birds of Prey*, this chapter notes how this creation of the uniquely 'female gaze', created without the burden of lack and the journey to 'self-realisation' that Quinn undertakes, carries echoes of the Female Gothic plot.

Writers like Ann Radcliffe, the Bronte sisters, Mary Shelley and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's works would instigate scholarly thought into the heroines, noticing the emphasis on release of feelings, flashes of human realism⁹⁷ and passionate engagement with the texts (Heilman 131). With this new form of Gothic literature, veering towards the Victorian era, new heroines would find a place in the Gothic as well. The madwoman, an integral part of the Gothic, was no longer seen as a figure whose 'concern with physical appearance prompts them

⁹⁷ This refers to what Heilman calls the Gothic novel's ability 'to enlarge the sense of reality and its impact on the human being' (131).

to give visual form to their self-denigration', but was rather read as alters for the heroine with the ability to act out in ways that her contemporary was taught not to (Stein 124). These madwomen would be punished and ostracised, while the protagonists, who are 'good submissive women have been rewarded with praise, marriage, admiration and sanctification' (Stein 124). *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) by Mary Elizabeth Braddon shows an 'interesting shift ... in its ambivalence towards the monstrous female criminal', deeply influenced by the growing social awareness of the gender disparity with regard to property and marriage laws (Davison 134).⁹⁸ It is with the feminist awakening that the madwoman now becomes 'dangerous', 'fully capable of escaping her confinement and burning the house down' (Williams 8).

Ascribing monstrosity to women gained popularity in the cinema of the 1940s–1950s, with the figure of the femme fatale becoming the focal point, or the actant of these narratives. The term itself is a political one, as defining the femme fatale quantitatively or through enumerating the most significant traits only highlights the anxieties that this figure provoked (Farrimond 4). The term related to the sexuality, femininity, danger, violence and deceit that the femme fatale would inspire in the classical noir films of the time, a result of which led to the death of the femme fatale in multiple such narratives. The figure arose again in the erotic neo-noir films of the 1980s–1990s, with these narratives focused on the social context of second-wave feminism in America (Farrimond 5). This neo-noir femme fatale is most commonly read as a hollow postfeminist heroine, as Farrimond finds that 'while she appears to be a powerful and agentic subject, [she] is actually a vacant shell onto which notions about female power can be projected' (10). Scholars like Tasker and Negra ('In Focus' 107), Rich (9), Stables (179) and Doane (2) have similar opinions of this figure – each reporting on the figure's

⁹⁸ Davison's chapter provides an in-depth analysis of how the Victorian Gothic literature shifted into an Old and New Gothic, with both male and female writers using their skill to bring these issues to light.

‘hollow quality’, a ‘carrier’ of power, one ‘lacking in subjectivity’ who ‘signals nothing but sex’ respectively.

Such contradictions have followed the figure of the femme fatale, which are blatantly presented in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988) in the figure of Jessica Rabbit. The predominantly male gaze presented by the narrative signifies Rabbit as an object of desire and thereby a threat to masculine power. And, as Farrimond finds, the threat is ultimately dissolved, with Rabbit stating ‘I’m not bad, I’m just drawn that way’, thus revealing that ‘even the most cartoonish of cinematic femme fatales demonstrate a complex connection between noir aesthetics and characterisation’ (3). Films from the late 1990s also use the figure of the femme fatale to invoke a sense of nostalgia, as required by the nature of the plots, but result in ‘a corrective to the punishment of femme fatales in classic noir’ (Farrimond 32). Similarly, in *Sin City: A Dame to Kill For* (2014), protagonist Ava Lord (performed by Eva Green) displays the aesthetics of the femme fatale, ‘while strategically dampening the transgressive potential’ of the figure. Thus, in containing a figure whose presence in a genre ‘concerned with issues of masculinity and modernity, of one man’s attempts to make some sense of the anxieties and confusion surrounding him’, the above-mentioned neo-noir films rewrite the generic intentions (Farrimond 35). These films emphasise ‘masculine success over masculine anxiety’, thereby containing the threat of the femme fatale to the sphere of the home (Farrimond 35).⁹⁹

However, the femme fatale is also read as a ‘fundamentally unstable figure’ by Bronfen (113). The femme fatale’s attribute of evading any concrete meaning, of being a consciously ambiguous figure, is what allows for her presence across multiple genres. Stables notes that the most ‘fascinating new feature of the femme fatale is her ability to *avoid textual suppression*, to win on her own terms’ (171, original emphasis). Doane also finds the femme fatale’s most

⁹⁹ Farrimond’s book notes how, in films such as *LA Confidential* (1997), *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995) and *Gangster Squad* (2013), the aesthetics of the femme fatale are introduced only to be later dismissed as a performance by the love interest, whose real motivation was to find a safe home provided by the end of the narrative by the male protagonist (30–35).

striking feature to be that ‘she is never what she seems to be’ and that films featuring this figure are ‘transforming the threat of woman into a secret, something that must be aggressively revealed’ (1). This evasion of any concrete meaning, while a source of the femme fatale’s powers, also reveals a postfeminist rhetoric that has led to the character’s resurgence in the 1990s. With the power of ‘choice’, the femme fatale then deploys her sexuality and femininity as and when required, ‘to unsettle traditional images of feminine virtue by substituting an image of themselves as “lustful feminists”’ (Ferriss and Young 5). This image, and the power generated by the image, reveals itself to be ‘ultimately hollow and based on a series of limited and limiting choices about sexual performance and feminine display’ (Farrimond 11). Bronfen similarly states, ‘[n]ot only will she not allow herself to be dominated by men who fall for her charms, but also the meaning she assumes in any given text refuses to be fixed’ (113).

Thus, the femme fatale becomes a ‘text to be read’, inviting ‘connecting between femininity, secrecy and concealment’ (Farrimond 15). This textuality goes back, and becomes yet another mode of activating the monstrous woman. Caputi’s analysis found that goddesses/monsters were never allowed to live, being killed in most patriarchal stories and yet remaining dynamically immortal, as oral traditions never stopped talking about her (19). Aguiar similarly finds that because the bitch will not ‘play nice’ with the men around her, ‘the bitch is exiled from the patriarchal playground’, thereby becoming the Other who is analysed and theorised (32). Such a reading applies to Harley Quinn’s early appearances, in which her characterisation is permanently attached to the Joker, and this attachment becomes a site of inquiry.

Harley Quinn has historically been read as an open text – the instability in her multiple depictions has had multiple meanings being ascribed to her function as a supervillain. The first comic *Mad Love*, while depicting an origin story, enacted a study into Quinn’s rationale for

engaging in a relationship with the Joker.¹⁰⁰ In contrast, Quinn's contemporaries like Poison Ivy and Catwoman have had stable reasons for their modes of supervillainy. Poison Ivy is always working to improve the environment, and Catwoman is always a thief who shares a close relationship with the Batman. The changes that took place in Quinn's characterisation over the years have allowed for multiple versions of the character to be read, and for her to be multiple things at once. Her gender was perhaps the primary basis for her textuality, and her sexuality is still one of her main attributes as a comic book supervillain. And yet every portrayal attempts to prove Quinn's ability as a worthy villain. Where the visuals would vehemently portray her as a sexual being, narratively she has been open to interpretation.¹⁰¹ In breaking away from the Joker and developing a friendship with fellow villainess Poison Ivy, Quinn is shown to exist in a space of their own creation where normative (L)aws of society do not apply. Their life of crime without the sadism of the Joker's villainy presents a villainy that aligns more with the rebellious trickster than with any incarnation of the Devil.

As mentioned earlier, Quinn's popularity during the 1990s as an active figure of intrigue could have been boosted by the influx of multiple action heroines in popular culture around the time. Having gained popularity in television shows like *Charlie's Angels* and *The Bionic Woman* which aired in the mid-1970s, the action heroine proved that 'there was an audience for tough women, albeit beautiful and slender, heterosexually desirable ones' (Inness 3).¹⁰² The 1980s saw figures like Ripley in the *Aliens* films and Sarah Connor in the *Terminator* films, whose 'musculinity' was displayed as images with which 'questions of gender identity

¹⁰⁰ Her creator Paul Dini wrote her first standalone graphic novel as a way to understand how anyone could choose to love the Joker ('The Secret Origins of Harley Quinn Revealed').

¹⁰¹ The essays in *The Ascendance of Harley Quinn* substantiate Quinn's textuality, with multiple interpretations of who Harley Quinn is and what she is meant to signify.

¹⁰² The fact that multiple such heroines have been introduced in television shows, and similarly Harley Quinn's first appearance was on a television show, is a parallel hard to ignore. Brown notes that 'action heroines have achieved much more critical and commercial success (not to mention fan following) in serialised formats ... serialised heroines benefit from the ability of longer formats to fully develop and explore characters' (*Dangerous Curves* 13), further suggesting a need to 'textualise' the active heroines as a simple two-hour film may not be enough.

... played out'; particularly through 'the masculinisation of the female body' (Tasker 139). Such muscular action heroine's images were contrasted by the neo-noir film in which the femme fatale made a reappearance; whose own power and the power against which she resists is 'constituted through the terms of sexuality' (Tasker 140). The late 1980s–1990s in particular saw the rise of the kind of femme fatale who "get away with" crimes against highly unsympathetic and mostly male characters' (Dickos 162, qtd. in Farrimond 76).

Each of these images has been analysed in terms of the sexualisation that comes with the image. Action heroines, in particular, are contentious as they compensate for the 'figure of active heroine by emphasising her sexuality, her availability within traditional feminine terms' (Tasker 19). Either through mobilising configurations of romantic interest or motherhood, the action heroine is relegated to secure roles of femininity (Tasker 19). If not either of these, the conundrum of the active heroine is resolved comedically, explaining the 'accident of fate' through which the heroine acquires her abilities (Tasker 20). Similarly, in terms of the femme fatales, the resurgence of this narrative emerged alongside the postfeminist rhetoric of 'girl power' and the 'can-do girl' (Farrimond 77), in which a 'socially accepted aggressiveness' of valorised white girls is likened to 'the rhetoric of liberation and empowerment through "heroification"' (Bae 32). The narrative of successful girls with 'active, can-do, aggressive and proactive girlhood' is also understood to incorporate 'raunchy sexual display, "laddish" use of alcohol and investment in mainstream consumer culture as routes to female empowerment' (Farrimond 77). The next section uses this historical context to identify Harley Quinn's characterisation in the comic books.

Mental Illness, Sexualisation and the Postfeminist Mystique: Comic Book Appearances

With the history discussed thus far in mind, constructing Harley as a wronged woman turned into femme fatale is highly tempting and very easy. Quinn is introduced being thrown

about by the Joker, while also aiding him in his crimes to gain his approval. She is madly in love with the Joker, staying in the abusive relationship because she believes that the Joker really loves her. She admits in one episode of *BTAS*, ‘My puddin’s a little rough sometimes, but he loves me, really!’ (‘Harley and Ivy’). Multiple characters on the show question her reasoning for being with the Joker, and she always responds with love. The Joker, sociopathic villain that he is, is an abusive partner. He force-feeds her fish after knowing she is allergic, hits her, demeans her and eventually throws her out a window (‘The Laughing Fish’, ‘Mad Love’). Through it all, Harley remains in love with him, justifying his actions as a way of showing his love for her.

Her first origin cartoon/comic ‘Mad Love’ reveals Quinn to be a psychiatrist by the name of Harleen Quinzel. Batman introduces her as having been a danger to society from the beginning, suggesting that she received high grades in her university courses by handing out romantic favours to her professors. Later, when she begins working at Arkham Asylum, Harleen’s ambitions for being a renowned psychologist are discussed as her reasoning for choosing to work with criminals. Her boss warns her about the inmates at Arkham, but Harleen remains unfazed. Instead, she gets distracted by the Joker, and with one wink, she is excited to work with the supervillain. In the comic, the Joker feeds her with stories of his supposed paternal abuse – a weak point for her, and gains her sympathy ensuring that she views him as ‘a lost, injured child looking to make the world laugh at his antics’ (Dini 30).

Knowing it was unprofessional, Harleen admits to having fallen in love with her patient. When the Joker is brought back to Arkham after having escaped, Harleen steals her jester costume and reveals herself to the Joker as ‘[his] new and improved Harley Quinn’ to break him out (Dini 35). Roddy notes how ‘donning the harlequin costume [acts] as a visual signifier of the foolish nature of her quest’, something only audience members are allowed to realise (Roddy). Chris Sims talks about Harley being ‘*hopelessly* in love’ with the Joker, in the sense

that there is no hope for her in such a relationship at all (*Ask Chris#173: The Trouble with Harley Quinn*, original emphasis). The Joker is too obsessed with the Batman to ever be a good enough partner to Harley, but her obsession, her addiction to him, is what eventually leads to her own self-destruction (*Ask Chris#173*). Though she had been manipulated by the man, actions like donning the costume to break out the Joker was her choice, ‘executing her own transformation to villainy’ (Coody 22). Through this comic, and indeed in the show *BTAS* as well, Joker’s abuse of Harley is ‘uncomfortably playful’ and only really revealed through Harley’s fearful expressions when the Joker hurts or threatens to hurt her (Coody 23). Quinn stays with him throughout, and when faced with the possibility that the Joker manipulated her, she gets mad.

Harley’s mould of the wronged woman turning to villainy is one that makes sense, but it also eternally ties her to her abuser. The animated show, the video games and the original comic series she had appearances in, all reinforced this idea – that Harley is who she is because of what the Joker did to her. Bengé notes that ‘no matter how much distance is put between them, references to Harley’s relationship with the Joker always seem to surface ... any growth the character manages is always undone’ (48). Bray casts her as a thrill-seeking femme fatale, for whom ‘the pursuit serves as a metaphor – Harley’s reward was the possibility of a normal life with the Joker, while the risk was living outside the law’ (37). The fact that she’ll never receive this reward, never be with the Joker and eternally be stuck in the abusive cycle does not make her much of an empowered woman or a feminist icon – which is something only the New-52 version of Harley achieved.

When DC rebooted their comic universe in the New-52 event, multiple characters received new origin stories and Harley Quinn was one among them. This new history, authored by Palmiotti, Conner and Roux, begins with Harley’s childhood and sets up the narrative of Harley being violent and thrill-seeking from the early days of her childhood. Now, she is

fascinated with the criminal mind and has the ability to read and understand high-level books at a very young age (Connor and Palmiotti, 'Secret Origins: Harley Quinn' 3). Her high grades are not ascribed to any mischief or misconduct, but are now achieved through her intelligence and hard work. Her fascination with the criminal mind is what leads her to Arkham Asylum, a job she takes up as a challenge (Connor and Palmiotti, 'Secret Origins: Harley Quinn' 7). She realises that the only way to get her patients to open up to her is to go undercover into the asylum, a task she accomplishes after beating up the warden. She colours her hair and gets the attention of many, but the Joker's attention is what changes things for her. This version of Harley admits that 'things went to hell' after meeting the Joker, revealing how he brought out a side of her that 'made me feel more complete as a person' (Connor and Palmiotti, 'Secret Origins: Harley Quinn' 10, 11). One of the most controversial things this version of Harley underwent was when the Joker pushed her into the vat of chemicals, permanently bleaching her skin into the grey-white that is similar to his own. First addressed in *Suicide Squad* #7, the comic retells Harley's arrival at Arkham Asylum as an unsure but violent new doctor. She breaks the Joker out of the asylum and he takes her to ACE Chemicals, the place where he 'was born' (Glass 13). He manipulates her, telling her, 'what happened here ... fixed me. And it can fix you, too' (Glass 13). Harley does not want this, she is doubtful and wants to go home, but the Joker laughs maniacally and throws her into the vat of chemicals.

As Owens notes, in throwing Harley into the chemicals, at the place where he 'was born', the Joker ties Harley to himself, thus removing any choice that Harley may have had in her appearance (9). This could be the case, but it could also be considered the starting point of the Joker's abuse, and also what led to Harley's obsession with the Joker.¹⁰³ Bray notes that the critique for the new origin is a large misunderstanding: '[w]hile Harley's transformed origin

¹⁰³ A version of the Joker's origin shows that he was pushed into the vat of chemicals by Batman, thus beginning his lifelong obsession with the Dark Knight.

establishes Harley as the Joker's victim, and in the same gesture provides a path for regaining her agency when she finally delivers the Joker his comeuppance' (38). The New-52 Harley has already broken up with the Joker, and is dealing with the process of becoming her own person – a mentally ill woman with an obsessive need to break the rules, but still essentially well meaning. Though released prior to the New-52, 'Harley's Holiday', an episode of *BTAS* considered what Harley might be like on her own, without the Joker's interference. She realises that people aren't easily forgiving of her past transgressions, but there are some who would be able to help her out on her journey to self-discovery. Batman plays a major role in her rehabilitation, as does her budding relationship with Poison Ivy and the friendships she finds in various groups.

One of the major accomplishments that this version of Harley was able to achieve was to finally break it off with the Joker. Though their relationship began in the TV show, bringing them over to the comics presented challenges – because the *BTAS* Joker was different from the comics Joker, and the comics Joker was a sociopathic murderer. The authors found it hard to sell a woman in love with this version of the Joker, and so they were separated (Sims, qtd. in Riesman). The New-52 Joker was absent for a while in the beginning, apparently having died. Harley believed he was dead, along with the rest of the world, which writer/artist Adam Glass says would initiate a change in her – 'She's got to survive, and she's going to do what she has to do to survive' (CBRTV 2012). Under his pen, Harley is more 'menacing – pushed to the edge by the thought of the Joker's presumed death' (Owens 8). So, even though she is now able to reflect on how the Joker permanently damaged her, she still resorts to violence 'as an escape for the trauma of her loss and permanent change ...' (Hoyer 116).

She starts out with a team, the Suicide Squad, and continues to be a part of this team for a long time. It is as a member of this team that she is able to come to terms with what the Joker did to her and also seek some form of closure. She is also more self-aware now, knowing

that she has the ability to become ‘someone who could be anything [people] wanted. The sex kitten, the seductress, the innocent, the aggressor, the antagonist, the victim, the ditz ...’, making Harley that much more of a powerful agent (Connor and Palmiotti, ‘Secret Origins: Harley Quinn’ 11). McCrystal also finds this aspect of her personality to be a crucial part of her identity as a supervillain – Harley’s ability to play different roles to suit different agendas ‘marks her as both modifiable and unpredictable’ (168, 170).¹⁰⁴ Harley admits when talking of the Joker, ‘[h]e really loved the ditz, so I played along’, which Jackson notices changes the power dynamics audiences believed existed all along between the two lovers – ‘... although it may seem that the Joker is more experienced and powerful, it is merely because Harley has allowed it and is instead perhaps humouring him’ (Connor and Palmiotti, ‘Secret Origins: Harley Quinn’ 11; Jackson 27). Instead of merely being a victim of the Joker, Harley is now presented as wholly self-aware, and in control of her emotions, her sexuality and her body.

This notion of ‘control’ is not as simple, since the comic series is still authored by an editorial team, created and drawn to make Harley Quinn an easily identifiable character when presented on paper. The very fact that Quinn has thus far had multiple origin stories, Coody finds, reveals a strategy ‘to explain away or undercut women’s agency’ (15). Origin stories, as has been established by this thesis, form an intrinsic part of the superhero narrative in their effort to delineate the information necessary to understand a particular version of the character. In rewriting origins, Coody finds that the changes reveal ‘what is deemed border-crossing or monstrous’ about the character (17). Focusing on female characters like Harley Quinn and Wonder Woman, Coody finds that ‘[t]he shift in origins can help us identify the patriarchal discomfort that these women have highlighted more precisely’ (17). In Quinn’s case, the New-

¹⁰⁴ This trait is also reminiscent of the neo-noir’s femme fatale and her ability to represent multiple things at once – thus progressing from being ‘hollow’ to generating meaning of her own.

52 origins present a wildly shifting agency, ‘sometimes she plays a victim of monstrous circumstances ... sometimes she is the gleefully naughty “lil’ monster”’ (Coody 22).

In this way, Quinn is shown to display a ‘postfeminist sensibility’, an idea of a confident female figure representing women as ‘sexual objects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner’ and a form of sexiness characterised by ‘choice, empowerment, self-surveillance ... articulated in an ironic and knowing register’ (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 271). Under the authorship of Connor and Palmiotti, Quinn is presented not as a ‘passive, objectified sex object’ who is narratively attached to the Joker (either in a relationship with him or breaking up with him), but as ‘knowingly playing with her sexual power’ in her admittance to playing the role of the ditz for the Joker (Gill, ‘Postfeminist Media Culture’ 148). The point to be noted here is that both versions inevitably tie Quinn to the Joker, who becomes the Law by which Quinn is defined. Every iteration of the character leads back to the Joker – either as a fascination for being the one who could fall in love with him or a fascination for being the one who could escape him.

Thus, being a primarily visual character, representations of Quinn are drawn so as to highlight this relationship that has tied her to the Joker. The representation of Harley’s body has faced the same issues that many (almost all) female comic characters have had to deal with – that of being overly sexualised. Initially, Harley is drawn to be wearing quite a modest bodysuit that covers her completely; there was not much of the blatant objectification that would follow in the years to come. That began in 2009 with the video game *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, in which Harley wears a corset and a short skirt, an outfit that highlights her breasts and long legs. The release of this video game was followed shortly by the release of the New-52, on the cover of which she is shown wearing what Owens calls ‘a nonsensical as well as impractical’ corset with shorts (19). Her jaunty jester hat was gone, replaced with two-tone hair in pigtails. Slater mentions that Harley’s ‘hypersexualised superhero femininity is amplified by

[readings] of her as the Joker's female other', which was what Glass presumably set out to do by 'birthing' Harley Quinn in the same spot that birthed the Joker (137).

This tendency towards a 'hypersexualised femininity' is not unique to the superhero narrative, since the action heroines have been displayed in a similar manner as well, notably Jinx from the James Bond film *Die Another Day* (2002). The Bond franchise has a well-established trope of the Bond girl, an erotic accessory for Bond who 'every male viewer wants to bed' (Brown, *Dangerous Curves* 8). In *Die Another Day*, with the introduction of Jinx (played by Halle Berry) an 'ideal solution' seemed to be presented to the studios with her presentation as 'an action heroine in her own right' (Brown, *Dangerous Curves* 8). Jinx shoots, fights and tosses around double entendres to match the wit of Bond, but the dominant selling point of the film, and her introductory shot in the film, was that of Jinx in an orange bikini, emerging out of the ocean. Such fetishisation of the action heroine at the outset indicates that her ability to match Bond's wit is a surprise, adding to her appeal as being not only beautiful but also challenging – by being both subject and object (Brown, *Dangerous Curves* 48). Similarly, Quinn is both subject and object, in that while her narratives feature her as an active action heroine, she is also objectified in her costuming and her visual attachment to the Joker.

This duality is a common feature of the Bad Girl comics that Brown identifies, referring to 'the highly sexualised nature of ... female characters that dominated the struggling comics industry in the mid-nineties' (*Dangerous Curves* 48). To attract the mostly male adolescent comics consumer, comics titles featured 'leggy and buxom superheroines in revealing, skin-tight costumes' (*Dangerous Curves* 48). Similar to action heroines, these comic characters carried an increased raw bodily power with an increased erotic appeal – displayed through the 'huge, gravity defying breasts, mile-long legs, perpetually pouty lips, and perfectly coiffed big hair' (Brown, *Dangerous Curves* 48). While superhero narratives are well known for their preoccupation with the physical ideal, in this 'sexualised hyperfeminine depiction [the Bad

Girl] not only compensate[s] for assuming traditionally masculine roles but combine[s] the symbolic “manliness” of toughness with the most basic symbols of “womanliness” (Brown, *Dangerous Curves* 50). This history of objectification with the threat of subjectivity follows Harley Quinn’s narrative. This threat of subjectivity is again relegated safely into the realm of femininity in Quinn’s new costumes, showing the importance of fashion and its place in the postfeminist heroine’s agency (Munford and Waters 112).¹⁰⁵

An attempt to amend the over objectification was made by Conner, Palmiotti and the multiple artists who worked on *Harley Quinn* #0, a fun comic that broke the fourth wall constantly and had a new artist work on every page – the narrative featured Harley as she tested different artists to identify an artist for her solo comic series. The comic sees her in all her different avatars, settling with Chris Hardin’s version of her, her outfit made up of the colours of her original jester costume, but now in a two-piece set of shorts and the corset. Slater states, ‘[Quinn’s] desirable body can be read as the product of forced modification’, what with the multiple origin stories and different versions activated to present a new version of Quinn’s narrative. Comic writers Connor and others seem to have distanced themselves from this narrative by letting Harley choose who draws her, thereby giving her ‘control’ over how she looks (Slater 137). Now free of the Joker’s influence and able to make decisions for herself, this series implies that this Harley would dress in any way she chooses without the threat of the male gaze diminishing her abilities as a villainess – enacting a version of agency in which Quinn’s ‘choice’ dictates how she is visualised. The new series sees her wearing similarly provocative outfits, but with the threat of sexual attack removed and Harley’s own abilities reinforced, the clothing (or lack thereof) is not seen as provocative; it is meant to be perceived as Harley expressing herself.

¹⁰⁵ Munford and Waters state how essential the ‘deployment of fashion’ was to the late-twentieth-century heroine, as a ‘representation of the action heroine and a model of postfeminist agency that is both grounded in and delimited by the girl hero’s “killer body”’ (112).

This treatment of sexuality as being deliberately activated by ‘Quinn’ herself brings to the forefront the postfeminist qualities that have become a major trait of the character and her narratives. As McRobbie notes, feminist critiques of ‘self-consciously sexist’ media are deliberately evoked – ‘Feminism is “taken into account” but only to be shown to be no longer necessary’ (33). Any disapproval of Quinn’s character design is immediately dismissed as ‘belonging to the past’ where choice did not exist, ‘to a time when feminists used to object to such imagery’ (McRobbie 33). In this narrative of ‘choosing’, Quinn enacts the makeover sequence so common in postfeminist media, displaying ‘a form of temporality in which youth is fetishised’ (Tasker and Negra, ‘Introduction’ 10). Further, Quinn’s youthful and energetic girlhood is celebrated, rather than demonised as a consequence of her time with the Joker. This girlhood fantasy of always ‘becoming’ rather than being burdened by a past is enacted multiple times, specifically noticeable through the multiple reincarnations that Quinn displays. Thus, in an amnesiac effort to erase the past, the postfeminist text and Quinn’s own narrative by extension ‘leave traces of the very histories they seek to erase’ (Munford and Waters 30).

Such language seems particularly Gothic in nature, enacting a ‘postfeminist mystique’ (Munford and Waters 10). By mobilising anachronism, the postfeminist mystique ‘reactivates modes of feminine identity that were “proper to a former age”, but which seem “out of harmony” with a present that has – so we are told – reaped all the benefits of second wave feminism’ (Munford and Waters 10). These modes of feminine identity are activated, Munford and Waters state, through hauntings: ‘As an attempt to draw attention to issues and injustices which might otherwise pass unheeded, feminism – like the Gothic – has repeatedly turned its attentions to what goes on behind closed doors, in women’s private lives’ (134–135). Further, they find that the Gothic presents itself as a ‘heimlich venue for “ghost feminism”’, by hosting debates about families, reproductive rights and sexual violence, all of which remain unsolved in postfeminism’s intent to redomesticate femininity with the ‘vast expansion in popular culture

material devoted to the celebration of cooking, cleaning, childcare, and other activities that take place largely in the home' (Munford and Waters 78; Negra 118).

Selig talks about Harley's sexuality as multifaceted: 'the interpretation thereof is irrevocably tethered to her corporeal presentation and practices' (Selig). This understanding could be applied to her entire narrative arc. Harley was introduced as a sidekick, created without the pressure other villains have, of being accurate to their comic counterparts. She is shown as having adopted her villainous persona 'volitionally – even cheerfully ... a radical break [in] tradition' (Roddy). She was hopelessly in love with a man who would never love her back, and subjected to violence that will always be a part of her franchise. This tragedy adds to her appeal because, as Romero Gallardo and Botello find, such violence is highly prevalent in our society. They add, 'what she offers for mass consumption is a figure who expresses problematic experiences that are difficult to rationalise' (186). Her agency takes sharp turns – 'sometimes she plays a victim of monstrous circumstances, sometimes she is a monstrous psychopath, sometimes she is the gleefully naughty "lil monster"' (Coody 22). Diamond aptly summarises her:

Her criminal or morally dubious enterprises are motivated by her empathy and love for others ... Because Harley empathises, she loves; because she loves, she commits – to the Joker, to a transformation of self, to crime. (126)

When the narrative follows the principles set for framing Quinn as the Other, whether in her introductory comic 'The Batman Adventures: Mad Love' or later issues with her joining The Suicide Squad, Quinn is depicted as the Monstrous woman and thus follows the Male Gothic plot. A consequence of being Othered results in an emphasis on Quinn's 'object-ness', wherein her depiction follows the trend of overly sexualised comic book heroines, and any enacted sense of agency is relegated to the postfeminist 'hollowness' (Tasker and Negra, 'In Focus' 107). Just as the postfeminist heroine is read to be hollow, so is the femme fatale – offering a powerful image of feminine power based on 'a series of limited and limiting choices

about sexual performance and feminine display' (Farrimond 11). As will be discussed later, this trend follows Quinn into the filmic representations as well – as in *Suicide Squad*, Quinn is once again attached to the Joker, to the Law. How, then, is the Female Gothic plot enacted through Quinn's narrative?

This chapter has used a few different terms to describe Quinn, and this subsection adds another, that of being an anti-hero. The reasoning for using terms like 'femme fatale', the 'bitch', 'hench-wench' and such is to define the specific history that describes Quinn's rise to fame. Terms such as the 'Manic Pixie Dream Girl' could potentially apply to her, but that is not the perspective this thesis takes. Quinn's representation from *BTAS* to the multiple video games and comic books has always originated in the 'evil' femininity that has come to be ascribed to the figures who are defined as 'femme fatales' and others. The Manic Pixie Dream Girl, for example, has been described as 'designed to function as an object of patriarchal fantasy who simply disappears once her work is done ... she is designed to be discarded once the male protagonist has used her for her singular purpose' (Gouck 5). Quinn, however, refuses to remain discarded – as has been displayed in both comic formats and now on film. The overt objectification that her characterisation has undergone to the postfeminist empowerment she is shown to display traces a clear history that shows an inability to remain stuck in time as often occurs with the Manic Pixie Dream Girl. Her criminal streak persists, and with the unwillingness to follow that patriarchal Law, Quinn is thus presented as a Female Gothic heroine.

Objectification and Narrative in Harley Quinn's Filmography

Fans of Harley Quinn were reportedly excited at the prospect of a live-action version of the character (Crispim). Margot Robbie was cast in the film *Suicide Squad* (2016) along with other well-known actors playing various roles. Directed by David Ayer, the film would follow a format similar to the comics of the same name, with government official Amanda Waller

forcing the supervillains to work for her. The story follows Floyd Lawton, Harley Quinn, Captain Boomerang, Killer Croc, El Diablo, Slipknot, Colonel Rick Flag and Katana on their mission to rescue Waller from the attack that Enchantress has launched on the fictional Midway City. A subplot of the film follows the Joker, played by Jared Leto, on a mission to reunite with Harley Quinn, who was arrested and sent to the prison Belle Reve by the Batman.

The film introduces Harley while in prison, being taunted by the prison guards. Her jail cell is placed in a larger room with scaffolding surrounding her prison cube, ensuring that she is seen at all times by her guards, depicting her in a state of constant display. She is told by a guard not to touch the bars, and in response she licks them. This scene, along with the one described at the start of the chapter, act as useful examples of how the film treats Harley Quinn. The scene is intercut with visuals of the guards ‘treating’ her, essentially abusing her as she is naked and taking selfies with her as she is tied down. Each of these scenes serves to present Quinn as monstrous, as mad and threatening in her overt sexuality. The dialogue shared between Quinn and the guards, the control they exert over her and celebration over having done so effectively serve to present Quinn as castrator.¹⁰⁶

The film has another introductory scene, this time with Amanda Waller introducing the members of Task Force X¹⁰⁷ to US Government officials. She uses Harley’s profession and official name to introduce her: Dr Harleen Quinzel is the Joker’s psychiatrist. The film picks their relationship up from a time when Harleen is already under the Joker’s influence. Amanda Waller’s voice-over tells the viewers that while Harleen thought she was curing him, she was already falling in love. Leto’s performance of the Joker and the film’s editing suggest that the Joker is hypnotising Harleen, with his brooding stare and the scenes intercut with bright vibrant colours that show what Harleen wants to do while under his influence. The film shows the Joker

¹⁰⁶ With the myth of the ‘tooth vagina’ enacted through Margot Robbie’s performance in her overt sexuality and this sexuality being the source of her evil (Creed 1).

¹⁰⁷ The official name of the Suicide Squad; the team is called the latter for audiences and as a threat to the members.

using electroconvulsive, or electroshock, therapy on Quinzel, and the same is used by the guards in the prison as a weapon of control. The significance of this method is noted by Munford and Waters, who find that this method is used not only to subdue but also to ensure that ‘the mind of the patient ... is transformed into a clean slate’ (127–128). Feminist critics like Friedan have discussed images of brainwashing and electroshock therapy ‘to explore women’s enculturation of traditional definitions of femininity as a kind of mind manipulation’ (Freidan 160, qtd in Munford and Waters 128). Such statements prove true in the film when Quinn views images of her future with the Joker, raising a family and living a suburban life, images that are presented as bait for her to join forces with the main villain of the narrative.

This film establishes Quinn’s madness to be a symptom of her overt sexuality, and she is thereby punished for it by being in prison. This extended introduction sets up the relationship that Harley shares with the Joker in this universe. The Joker seems to *spread* his influence over her, evident through the pulses and vibrant colours that spread from his person as he stares down at her. And Harley was never given a chance, seemingly having no real choice or agency in her relationship with the Joker. The fact that this film does not show Harleen Quinzel, but starts off from when she is already under his control, is a major indicator of Harley’s status in the film. Narratively, Harleen was not the attraction of this story, neither was her decision to change into Harley. Instead, the appeal of Quinn’s objectification is strategically applied to the film as a consequence. Similar to the teen femme fatale narratives of *Cruel Intentions* and *Pretty Persuasion*, Quinn’s purpose here is to ‘demonstrate the complexities of trying to live as a ... girl in an environment which insists that girls’ only power is their sexuality, and yet judges and vilifies them for publicly utilising it’ (Farrimond 70).

This is only further proved when the villains are told to suit up for their first mission as a squad. Harley opens her case and, with longing, takes out her ‘Puddin’ choker, kissing it and then wearing it. Her outfit, consisting of fishnets, red and blue shorts, and a t-shirt that reads

‘Daddy’s lil’ monster’ is worn in public. Here, as Rudolf finds, ‘the clothes function as text’, declaring her the ‘Joker’s Property’, ‘reducing her to appearance and pathology’ (7). When she is done dressing, she turns around and realises that everyone has stopped to stare at her, her privacy invaded by the soldiers in camp and by audiences—through the film’s formal elements of a slow-motion tracking shot from her legs to her face. This depiction aligns with the scopophilic tendencies of the male gaze, in that the ‘conditions of screening and narrative conventions give the spectator the illusion of looking in on a private world’ (Mulvey 9). Harley Quinn, as a comic character brought into the format of film, may carry a multitude of meanings, but when visualised in such manner, the overtly male gaze is emphasised, displaying a ‘preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma [of castration]’ by ‘investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery’ (Mulvey 13). Paasonen and colleagues note that objectification means ‘being reduced to one’s physical properties – to be treated like a piece of meat’, and through this scene in which Quinn undergoes a ‘makeover’ from prisoner to villain, the film is cementing the purpose that she serves in this narrative (134). The film, *the Joker*, *the Suicide Squad*, and the film’s narrative itself emphasise and focus on Harley the Ditz, and that is what is delivered.

The sexual undertones of Harley and the Joker’s relationship are most amplified in the scene when she recalls her fall into the vat of chemicals. The Joker has an ownership over her, which she allows and even welcomes. She wears a jacket that declares her ‘Property of J’ for most of the film, wears a choker with his nickname and does anything and everything he tells her to do. Jenna Isaacs identifies that this film reinforces their relationship to be a desirable one, where the alpha hero does everything possible to be with his romantic interest while the heroine waits in her tower to be rescued by her prince (66). Though the two play around with the idea of a consensual BDSM relationship – what with the Joker calling himself her ‘Daddy’ and Harley wearing a choker with his name on it – the two are clearly not on equal footing. He

demands of her, and she obliges him. And even though the film shows Harley falling into the vat of chemicals on her own, without the Joker having to push her, it is clear that he has manipulated her into thinking like him. Isaacs states clearly, 'She is not capable of refusing the Joker ... because she is seen solely as the object that provides visual and sexual pleasure to the male audiences' (83).

On some level, the film attempts to show Quinn's uncertainties in engaging with the Joker, showing scenes where Quinn seemingly recognises the hopelessness of her relationship. She asks Deadshot if he is ever been in love, and when he says 'no', she diagnoses him (showing traces of her knowledge as a psychiatrist) as 'another textbook sociopath', displaying some sense of awareness of what a healthy relationship should look like. But almost immediately after, the Joker comes to rescue her, and she runs into his arms. The Joker says all the right things, hitting her with romantic spiel like '... you know I'd do anything for you'. Waller then shoots down the helicopter they are on, and the Joker gets blast back into the burning copter, appearing to have died. Harley looks devastated by this, taking off her Puddin' choker as she realises that he is probably gone for good. She offers herself up to the remaining members of her team. But they respond without jokes that they are glad she could make it. She stops playing up the ditz at this point.

Now on her own, she is able to articulate herself better than she did earlier. Even when tempted by the Enchantress with a 'normal' life with the Joker, without their make-up, she is able to stand up to the villainess – not because Harley was tempted with a lie, but because her friends were hurt. It is only in these few shining moments that Harley is allowed to be who she is. She realises that she was never made to live a normal life, realising that to be the reason why she can never leave the Joker. But more importantly, she recognises her place among the misfits and fights for them. Unfortunately, this minimal 'agency' that the film allows her is too little, too late for it to have any impact on redeeming the Harley that has been set up from the start of

the film. From the introduction scene onwards, Quinn has been an object to be viewed by prospective audiences and by the other characters in the narrative. In an attempt to display Quinn's ambiguous status as both object and subject, the film attempts to separate her from the Joker, but inevitably fails at this as well.

The final scene sets things back to 'normal' as the Joker breaks into Belle Reve to rescue Harley. She jumps into his arms and he tells her, 'Let's go home', exactly what every girl dreaming of her prince wants to hear. Scholars Kohlman et al. find that portrayals of relationships constitutive of domestic violence contribute to desensitisation, that 'this type of abuse is cinematically portrayed as romantic rather than dangerous and ominous behaviours in violent relationships' (4). The film makes their relationship out to be like something out of a fairy tale, an act that affects Harley more than anyone else. It erases her individuality, her status as a victim, and the hopelessness that signifies her relationship with the Joker (Isaacs 70). That the film is unsure of how to handle the relationship between the Joker and Quinn is evident from the quick joining and separation of the couple – the film attempts to honour that history of the couple while concurrently examining Quinn's motives to do so. In this framework of analysing her motivations then, Quinn resembles femme fatales, objectified through her overt sexuality, examined by the narrative to understand her motivations, and inevitably left unresolved in rejoining the Joker: left securely in the feminine space of partnership with her masculine lover.

Harley Quinn made her third live-action film appearance in *The Suicide Squad* (2021), directed by James Gunn. The film was not intended to be a sequel or a reboot, according to Gunn, 'it's its own thing' (qtd. in Travis). The premise of the story is the same, and the film even features a few returning characters such as Quinn, Flag, Captain Boomerang and Waller. While the main plot of the film focuses on the Squad and their mission, Harley has a separate adventure that shows her change from the first film. In this film, she first appears wearing her

original red and black, but instead of a jester costume she wears a corset and pants with a jacket that reads 'Live Fast Die Clown'. She still wears a choker, but this one has no name on it, no sense of ownership. Because of the events that transpired in her previous film, *Birds of Prey*, Harley has successfully broken off her relationship with the Joker and commits crimes on her own. This iteration of Harley has moved on from her past and is seemingly enjoying every moment for what it offers. When sent back to Belle Reve penitentiary for '... road rage. In a bank', Harley joins the new Squad on their mission with excitement, greeting her old friends Captain Boomerang and Flag, and making new acquaintances with Javelin and others. She is originally sent to the Island Corto Maltese on the team that was meant to be a decoy, literally sent to die. She survives, and is gifted Javelin's javelin just as he is dying.

Quinn's narrative arc in this film is to yet again be tested on her worthiness as a romantic interest. Having survived the landing onto the island, Quinn finds herself in the presence of the island's dictator Silvio Luna – both of whom are instantly enchanted by each other and effusive in their praise for each other. She is made-up, dressed up and treated well by Luna's staff, a novelty presented to her that she enjoys. Each of these is again reminiscent of the steps that the postfeminist heroine undergoes to reach her pinnacle – celebrating her 'power of consumption' in her celebration of the staff's treatment towards her and celebrating her 'agency' in her ability to identify Luna as yet another violent and power-hungry man, resulting in her killing him (Negra and Tasker, 'Introduction' 4). By viewing her once again through the lens of a romantic interest, Quinn is relegated to the role of the sidekick, offering 'a point of differentiation' from both her own male romantic interest and the rest of the Suicide Squad (Tasker 16). As Negra and Tasker note, with the celebration of the postfeminist heroine, these narratives also raise the consequences of female independence: that of 'emotional isolation for women' and 'the loss of power for men' ('Introduction', 4). This film does the same, as Quinn is now faced with having to come to terms with her 'postfeminist agency'.

Having been caught and tied up for killing the old dictator, the new dictator and his staff question and torture her for answers. Yet again, audiences are provided the visual of Quinn hanging from a ceiling and being electrocuted with a weaponised stick – the phallic imagery hard to ignore. Revealing inner thoughts, Quinn sings ‘I ain’t got nobody / Nobody cares for me ... I’m so sad and lonely’, a scene however instantly contrasted by the rest of the Suicide Squad arriving at her location to rescue her. Quinn proves capable of saving herself, however, by escaping from the tied bonds and shooting down multiple guards assigned to keep her prisoner. Her body, which has thus far been primarily objectified for the viewers and characters in the film, is now a weapon as she chokes a man to death with her legs and uses her feet to unlock the latch that was keeping her tied up. Further, the dress that had been gifted to her to meet Luna is torn and weaponised – Quinn here uses the instruments of objectification and postfeminist consumerism against the guards who have locked her in.

The film differs vastly from the first iteration, in that Quinn’s goal of saving her friends is earned through the narrative. Rather than placing Quinn’s primary motivations at achieving the Joker’s attention, the film consistently shows Quinn’s motives to be valuing her friends. The importance of Quinn and her friendships is theorised later in the text, but the point of interest here is in how the film enacts Quinn’s agency as compared to the previous film. In the first film, Quinn is tempted with a bad relationship, and turns away from it at the moment, only to rejoin the Joker by the end of the film. *The Suicide Squad*, in contrast, shows Quinn’s final actions to be that of leading millions of rats to destroy the giant monster, Starro the Conqueror. Thematically as well, the notion of a disenfranchised Harley Quinn leading the rats, who have been showcased to be undervalued, terrifying creatures and the centre of many jokes in the film adds more value to Quinn’s leadership. The stakes are not personal for Quinn in this film, she is able to shrug off when the team leader decides not to engage with Starro destroying the city. At the same time, in leading the rats towards the destruction of Starro, Quinn’s narrative arc is

completed – her purpose is to fight alongside her friends, landing the final blow in destroying the threat they face together. Her agency is displayed despite postfeminist restrictions that emerge; in combating those restrictions and finding a family with her friends, Quinn is not objectified. Over the remaining duration of the film, shots focus primarily on Quinn’s performance of running, jumping and fighting alongside her male Squad members.

Gunn, who wrote and directed the film, wanted to ‘bring out [Quinn’s] “true lunacy” in the new movie’ (Gunn qtd in Crow). While she is more physically capable in this film than in her previous iterations, what with her ability to unlock her tied up hands with only her feet, she is shown to be at her most vulnerable. The dramatic shift between the two *Suicide Squad* films in representing Quinn as a tragically defined Gothic heroine occurs during the final scene, but is also a method of understanding Quinn’s narrative. Revisioning Quinn by focusing on the importance of friendships rather than the yearning for the Joker’s affection is a major part of *Birds of Prey*, which *The Suicide Squad* benefited from. While Quinn is trying to escape from her past and the temptations to fall for the Gothic villain are presented in *The Suicide Squad*, Quinn is still a lonely gigolo performing for the audience’s pleasure. Quinn is not sexualised or objectified in *The Suicide Squad*; instead, her ability to remain optimistic presents itself as a performance, a mask put on to hide how damaged by her abuse as she actually is. Her performance stops being one when with friends; she does not stop being funny and ditzzy when the end of the world is near, because the world does not matter to her, her friends do. And when they die, as Flag does in this film, she mourns their death. Her commitment to her friends is most obvious when considering her ‘standalone’ film, *Birds of Prey*.

Analysing Quinn in *Birds of Prey*

Birds of Prey (2020) was directed by Cathy Yan, written by Christina Hodson, and features five women in the leading roles. Margot Robbie, playing Harley Quinn and producing the film, realised the gap in the market for female-led superhero films and set out to make one

of her own. The fact that there were so many women at the lead of the film might have been one of the reasons why it has such a distinct style, with female friendships being portrayed in a superhero world and some critics calling it ‘a celebration of the female gaze’ (Hassan). As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, the female gaze presents a narrative not created through the conflict of the Oedipal crisis. Instead, the female gaze is ‘creative’: as the heroine of the Female Gothic plot, ‘in “realising” things or persons other than herself the heroine literally “makes them real”’ (Williams 145). Thus, as Williams notes, the Female Gothic plot presents a narrative in which the protagonist (the Gothic heroine) ‘has a different relation to her own mother and to that cultural (m)other repressed in her access to the Symbolic’ (139). In its focus on female protagonists and narrated by a female, *Birds of Prey* stands apart from the films discussed in the previous chapters. The film is thus a presentation of the superhero narrative within the framework of the Female Gothic plot, with a focus on Harley Quinn.

This method of using the Female Gothic as a framework is further justified by the narrative’s focus on the friendships that Quinn develops over the course of the narrative. The protagonists’ perception of the world is expanded in the Female Gothic plot, as she ‘opens up the possibility of discovering good, and of finding what she seeks’ (Williams 145). Just as in the myth of Psyche, wherein she required the aid of other creatures to accomplish her task, Quinn in *Birds of Prey* realises how important it can be to have good friends. This idea is also not limited to Gothic literature, as the importance of female friendships becomes a grounding factor in multiple action heroines’ narratives. Television shows like *Xena: Warrior Princess* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* each is able to engage in the importance of female friendship, the value that each friend has for the other becomes a major plot point in each show. As Ross finds, ‘both television series stress that a woman can be “tough enough” to fight patriarchy when she learns to listen to other women’s perspectives on the world and when she values her emotional bonds with other females as a source of strength’ (231). Robbie proposed a film that would

show the strength of female friendships. She stressed the importance of Harley needing to belong to a girl-gang, stating that ‘Harley loves interacting with people’ (qtd. in Foutch). This aspect of the film becomes one of the main areas of focus in this analysis.

Though the film does focus on female friendships, and a girl-gang is eventually formed, there is no doubt from the first scene that this is Harley’s film since it begins with her voice-over narration. The film follows Harley, her break-up with the Joker and the friendships she forms with Cassandra Cain, Black Canary (aka Dinah Lance), Huntress (aka Helena Bertinelli) and Rene Montoya. Multiple storylines follow each of the protagonists and converge towards the end, necessitating the women to team up and defeat Black Mask (aka Roman Sionis). It begins with Quinn narrating her life story set to animated depictions of Harleen in her childhood, her professional achievements and finally her relationship with the Joker. Harley’s childhood storyline is similar to that set up by Connor and Palmiotti in their Harley Quinn series, indicating that this Harley is not so much a victim of her circumstances but is instead an active participant. The following sections discuss various elements of her character, their importance in the narrative of this film and in the overall character arc.

Harley’s Sense of Wonder

Harley’s child-like wonder at anything new in her world is something that distinguishes her from other villains. Anytime there is a new development, or when something works in her favour, she is instantly in wonder. Although she is hurt by her break-up with the Joker, her new life and its possibilities are enthralling for her – the first example being that of her new apartment. She clearly loves the place, and the ability to decorate it any way she wants is a novelty she has not experienced before. She talks about opening herself up to the possibility of new love, with the visuals showing her in a pet store and immediately getting excited when she sees a hyena, calling it her ‘nice baby’. As the shop owner comes onto her, making inappropriate

suggestions for how she can pay for her purchase, Harley narrates about how new love must be fed – with visuals cutting to the hyena chewing on the shop owner's leg.

When Harley decides that it is time to declare her break-up with the Joker publicly as she passes by ACE Chemicals, wide-eyed, she makes an impulsive decision that, though juvenile, provides her with some peace. And even though the chemical plant explodes into fire, focalized through Harley's perception, the explosion becomes colourful fireworks with her voice-over stating that she finally found 'the closure I needed ... A chance to be my own woman'. In each instance described in the pervious paragraph and this one, Quinn's independence is focalized to her as being a new chapter full of wonder, reiterating the postfeminist culture's emphasis on a 'freedom of choice with respect to work, domesticity ... physical and particularly sexual empowerment' (Negra and Tasker, 'Introduction' 2). It is in this new state of 'vitality' that Quinn finds herself able to express her 'youthful' and 'playful' self (Negra and Tasker, 'Introduction' 7), with a makeover of her environment – the new apartment – and the body – a haircut, and covering up her old tattoos – that 'enact a temporality in which youth is fetishised and change accelerated or even presented as instantaneous' (Negra and Tasker, 'Introduction' 10).

Harley's love for her breakfast and its following demise are explicit scenes that are exaggerated by the film's formal elements through the use of slow-motion, highlighting the sound effects produced by the food being cooked and Harley's own thoughts: 'What a way to start my new life!'; further demonstrating how Harley sees the world. When she loves the food, she sees it being prepared in slow motion, while she feels like she is witnessing something that gives her pure pleasure – each formal element adding to the representation of Quinn as a postfeminist heroine. This sense of glee does not distract her from having to escape from the cops and various other people who are wronged by her. As she runs through the market, she finds a bum bag matching her outfit, and unable to stop herself, she steals the bag and then

continues to run. And when she escapes from all those chasing her, Harley's smirk at the camera to reveal how '[t]hat felt pretty great' define the youthful exuberance that is valued by postfeminist cultures. This display also aligns with postfeminism's acceptance of the 'hyperaestheticisation of everyday life', with the emphasis on retail pleasures and luxurious items frequently displayed by postfeminist texts (Negra and Tasker, 'Introduction' 7). *Birds of Prey*'s approach evades such simple signification, however, in the almost immediate destruction of the sandwich and the obtaining of her retail pleasures through theft, rather than her own earnings.

This chase scene and most of the other action scenes involving Quinn display this capacity that Quinn has to 'get away with' crimes that she commits (Farrimond 76). In this way, Quinn mimics the postfeminist discourse of the 'can-do girl' with 'the world at her feet' and a 'belief in [her] capacity to invent themselves and succeed' (Harris 14). For Farrimond, it is the shift in semantics and its attached signification that becomes politicised when considering the femme fatale (who commits crimes and has to die as a result) and the postfeminist victorious girl (who commits crimes and is celebrated for it) (76). Quinn's introduction as a character in the 1990s aligns her portrayal with the teenaged victorious girl as depicted in films such as *Mini's First Time* (2006), *Wild Things* (1998), *Knock Knock* (2013) and *Spring Breakers* (2013). Each of these films engages with a teenaged girl having successfully seduced and conned multiple adult men, demonstrating a 'victory of young femininity over male representatives of patriarchal control' (Farrimond 80). In *Birds of Prey*, Quinn's ability to escape the police and multiple other criminals and eventually defeat Sionis similarly showcases the triumph of her youthful irreverence over the patriarchal institutions that seek to control her.

A major element of the teenaged femme fatale's success is attributed to the female friendships that are developed over the course of their narratives, displaying that 'there is a strong need for girls to place boys on the side (if not out of sight) in order to develop

independent, confident and assertive identities' (Kearny 138). Similarly, Quinn's success in killing Sionis is due in large part to the friendship she experiences over the course of *Birds of Prey*, particularly with Cassandra Cain. As she develops her friendship with Cain while robbing the grocery store, Harley laughs in joy of having found a new friend and in being able to rob a high-end grocery store. Just before the final fight, when Harley realises that all the protagonists are going to have to work together to defeat Sionis, she is depicted as being mostly excited. She suggests working together, revealing that having successfully done so with the Suicide Squad before, she knows that such a strategy would definitely work in their favour. While sharing weapons with the Birds of Prey, she treats it all like a sleepover – offering 'clothes' (armour) to wear, wanting to share 'pizzas and cosmos'. And when the other Birds impress her, she does not hesitate to share her admiration for them.

After the fight and revelry, Harley celebrates her independence by pawning the diamond and starting her bounty-hunting business. Throughout the whole process, she cannot help but grin widely as she finally starts living the life she wants with no one to answer to, no men to appease and no one to prevent her from enjoying her egg sandwich.

Harley the Psychiatrist Turned Bail Bondsman

Harley's psychiatric abilities rarely make an appearance as she has willingly let go of that aspect of her past with a focus now on the criminal lifestyle she has adopted. Her status as a psychiatrist was something she found restrictive, a job that gave her the ability to look through the window of the criminal mind but not really able to be a part of it.¹⁰⁸ Since her ambition was to fully understand the criminal mind and learn how it functions, becoming one with the criminals would have been the only way for her to fully understand how they think. But even though she left that life behind when she surrendered to the Joker, the information she would

¹⁰⁸ Quinn's reasoning for leaving behind the life of a psychiatrist is mostly attributed to her joining the Joker; however, different origin stories explore this in different ways. While the first origin story allowed Quinn to make the decision for breaking up with Joker to be on her own, the New-52 revision showed Quinn's stressful life while working, and the Joker was shown to tempt her away from the job to a life of 'freedom'.

have gained to study to earn her degree would never leave her. As is shown through the narrative of this film, Quinn continues to psychoanalyse the people around her, realising that the majority of the people she surrounds herself with have some form of mental illness.

This film gives her plenty of opportunities and subjects to psychoanalyse – including herself. In the introductory scene, Harley narrates how much clarity hindsight has given her, realising that she fell in love with the Joker. She narrates, with the accompanying animated visuals showing literally how she ‘only had eyes for Puddin’’, having ‘lost all sense of who [she] was’. She is able to look back now and see how much she gave to their relationship and how little he gave back, how she did a lot of the scheming of their crimes and he took the credit. The ability to look back and realise how toxic her relationship was with the Joker shows distance from the time that the events took place – this Harley is granted the clarity to realise how she was caught in a toxic relationship with no external aide. Quinn here is clearly enacting the second-wave’s realisation of leaving the ‘childlike femininity of “Occupation: housewife”’ behind, now looking for ways to make a name for herself (Freidan 293). It is this realisation that allows her to enter into the city with a professional yearning to ground her sense of agency and ‘the possibility to assuming a civic identity of participating’ (Munford and Waters 43). As Helen Gurley Brown writes, ‘Free from the tedious drudgery of a sexually and emotionally moribund marital life she is known by what she does rather than by whom she belongs to’ (89). This is what Quinn is working towards in *Birds of Prey*.

Thus begins Quinn’s effort to establish herself in the city, for which she finds an opportunity with the film’s antagonist, Roman Sionis. The chance to make a name for herself and make money as a bounty hunter/bail bondsman is presented to her in the form of a diamond that Sionis wants. It is along this quest that Quinn encounters youngster Cassandra Cain and the other Birds. Thus, along with the monetary and security benefits offered by this job, Quinn is able to acquire a kinship among other women who have similar grievances with their collective

antagonist, Sionis. Quinn utilises both her specialities when conducting her work, using her physical prowess to obtain the diamond and protect herself and Cain from other goons, while using her psychoanalytic skills to disarm her enemies and better understand their motives. While postfeminist work culture has created a narrative of employment being a burden to a woman's true aspirations of marriage (Leonard 103), by the end of the film Quinn has seemingly reached her apotheosis. She has managed to establish a business as a bond bailman alongside a new friendship.

This optimistic outlook of her reality is vastly different from the other two subjects this thesis has analysed, for whom the task undertaken or the jobs they perform become a burden, weighing on their subconscious and thus driving them to perform violent acts against innocents. Contrastingly, Quinn's work has brought her happiness, which could be further appropriation of the Female Gothic's gaze to be 'creative rather than a destructive act' (Williams 145). Of the Gothic heroine, Williams writes, '[i]n "realising" things or persona other than herself the heroine literally "makes them real". Her perception enlarges her world, opens up the possibility of discovering good, and of finding what she seeks' (145). Quinn's journey to self-realisation involves becoming empathetic to others as well as her own needs. During a tense scene, Quinn agrees to give up the child in accordance with the patriarchal Law, as she follows the rules of 'business is business' to exchange Cain for Sionis's protection against multiple goons who have now destroyed her house. Later she regrets this decision, apologising and saving Cain's life while killing Sionis along with the Birds of Prey, now open to the possibility of good and finding the friendship she seeks with Cain.

Harley's Friendships

One of Quinn's most enduring character traits across media is that she is able to acquire and maintain friendships across a wide spectrum of DC characters. It is a quality that allows her to be among the mainstays of the Suicide Squad, one of the most notorious comic groups to have

a revolving door of characters enter and leave for different comic runs. This group along with Gotham City Sirens with Catwoman and Poison Ivy are two groups in the comics that Quinn prominently features in as a protagonist, functioning as a comedic relief more often than not. In film adaptations, Quinn has primarily existed as a part of a group – the Suicide Squad and in this film, the Birds of Prey. Her appeal as a comic relief is aided by the fact that Quinn’s view of the world is vastly different from that of the other characters around her. Thus, while Gotham city acts as a threat to Arthur Fleck/the Joker (as discussed in the previous chapter), the city presents itself as an exciting new opportunity to establish herself for Quinn. This primarily optimistic outlook of most circumstances acts as a counterpoint to characters who may have a more serious outlook on the world, such as the other Birds of Prey. Quinn’s friendships with the Suicide Squad continue into this film, with her recognising Captain Boomerang on a wanted poster in the police station. Her ability to make new friends easily is shown in her attempts to join a local roller-derby team after breaking up with the Joker. The team clearly values Quinn’s brutality as a player but seems unable to be the kind of friend that Quinn is looking for – one who understands the journey she has thus far been on and the work it would take to maintain her independence. This comes in the form of an acquaintance with Dinah Lance, who saves her from an assault. Though the two do not immediately start off a friendship, they meet each other as equals. Similarly chaotic introductions to the other Birds, Montoya and Huntress, lead to the four women teaming up against Roman Sionis, a crime boss who has wronged each of them in different ways. They join forces, a common trope in media featuring women warriors to learn that ‘a woman can be “tough enough” to fight patriarchy when she learns to listen to other women’s perspectives on the world and when she values her emotional bonds with other females as a source of strength’ (Ross 231).

Her friendship with Cain develops unexpectedly. Cassandra idolises Harley, not just for being successful at roller derby, but also for being successful in her criminal career. Harley’s

arc in the film begins with her clear indifference towards Cain, claiming that she would willingly kill her, but she eventually changes her mind. While they ‘shop’ in a grocery store, Cassandra asks Harley how she got to be the way she is – a woman mercenary with the ability to walk into fancy grocery stores. Harley states that no one is like her, and that her life is not something a young child should aspire for. Then she starts to impart life lessons to Cassandra while sharing her living space with her – a space Cassandra claims is ‘dope’. She tells her about how to treat men; they share cereal, laugh at cartoon shows and put on nail polish together. But Harley really starts to realise the benefits in having Cassandra around when the latter, without knowing anything about him, says the Joker ‘sounds like a dick’. This is different for Harley; everyone she has met knows about the Joker and how he misused her – something that must be a source of embarrassment for her upon breaking up with him. The fact that Cain, not knowing about his crimes and just from the minimal introduction Harley provides, is able to dismiss him makes Harley trust her a little more, so she is able to admit that ‘it’s kinda nice having the kid around’.

Such relationships are found in popular series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Xena: The Warrior Princess* as well, wherein the heroines are supported in their heroic endeavours by their female friends, encouraging each other ‘to push the limits of what it means to be a hero, emphasising the importance of flexibility’ (Ross 231). As Ross further states, such ‘interdependency of these series’ titular heroines with their best friends refutes that heroes work best alone; rather, women need other women’ (232). This is further exemplified in the final scene, when Quinn convinces the Birds to all work together to defeat Sionis once and for all.

Almost instantly, she becomes friendly with them all. When Huntress shares her story of revenge with the group, Harley claps for her, seeming genuinely pleased that Huntress was able to get back at the men who ruined her life. She shares her weapons with the Birds and calls the entire thing similar to a sleepover. She openly shares her admiration for her fellow Birds, calling

Huntress ‘cool’ multiple times. When the fight begins, she does not hesitate to help them out, whether with defeating the men who attack them, or with providing hair ties to keep hair out of their faces. When they help her, she does not hesitate to share her thanks. When the bulletproof vest saves Montoya’s life, she looks in awe and states, ‘aren’t you glad you wore that? Sexy and bulletproof’, clearly enjoying her ability to provide for the people whom she has come to care for. After the fight, she is able to celebrate the victory with her new friends over tacos and margaritas – something she wanted to share with her roller-derby teammates, but could not. It is contrasted now with the Birds openly sharing their admiration for each other’s fighting skills – with women supporting each other for the skills they individually bring to the table. And they even admit to misjudgements, with Montoya apologising to Harley for underestimating her. At the end of the film, Harley has employed Cassandra in her new bounty-hunting business, sheepishly admitting to having developed a real friendship with Cassandra.

The film very clearly enacts the Female Gothic plot in this manner. Quinn’s view of the world allows for the characters around her to open up, share their knowledge and feelings and work together to defeat Sionis. The female Gothic plot, which values the heroine’s ability to ‘make sense’ of the world (Williams 145), ‘recognises that appearances may deceive and that the identity of the other is complex’ thus allowing for ‘duality or multiplicity’ to replace ‘unity or oneness as the assumed (and privileged condition)’ (Williams 149). Quinn and Huntress, who thus far have primarily been working alone to achieve their separate individual goals, come together in this final scene, replacing the need to defeat Sionis on their own with the acceptance of the other women’s abilities to help them defeat Sionis together. Just as in the myth of Psyche, who must work with others to gain her Paradise, the Birds of Prey work together to gain their own versions of the same idea.

Harley the Anti-Hero

The main arc for Harley through the film is working towards securing her own safety. She is dealing with the break-up of a bad relationship, and once that is declared to the world, she has to deal with the repercussions of having been in a relationship with the Joker. Her previous actions as the Joker's henchwoman have upset many – the police and various street-level thugs, all at the same time. Almost every new character that Harley encounters has grievances against her. With this huge target on her back and no one to protect her, Harley's task over the course of the film is to ensure that she becomes enough of a threat that she will not have to pay for any previous grievances. She does not want anyone's protection based on the fear they generate, refusing to work for another person who could potentially control her. On the journey to proving her capability, she also shows her true nature of being harmless until provoked.

Though first introduced as the henchwoman to the Clown Prince, Harley is well aware of her capabilities exceeding those of the Joker's – she calls herself the 'badass broad' who stood behind the Joker's powerful public persona and reveals that she was the mastermind behind some of his greatest heists. At this time, she was using all her intelligence and criminal abilities as a way to prove her love for her 'Puddin''. He was all she cared about, and gaining his love back was the reason she worked so hard. But once they had broken up, she could revel in the chaos she created for her own enjoyment, the first of which takes place when Harley is coaxed into 'paying in kind' for her pet hyena, Bruce.

During the introduction, Harley talks about having to feed her new love with the visuals cutting from the shop-owner coming on to her to Bruce the hyena eating the man's leg. The actual act of how the limb got to be in her home is not shown. This is a scene revealed later, when Harley realises that the target on her back includes everyone she ever wronged, including the shop-owner's brother. His name is revealed to be Ralph Murray, and then the scene cuts to the day Harley bought Bruce. After she seemingly completes 'paying' him, as she 'wipes'

herself, Harley encourages Bruce to go after Murray's brother, the shop's owner. Murray wants revenge for his brother's death, but Harley was not exactly wrong herself. Being coaxed into performing sexual favours when she clearly did not want to (she is cringing away from him while he talks into her ear) is reason enough for her to get angry and act out. It is a violent way to act out, but in Harley's perception of the world, this is an appropriate reaction. Here, Quinn is seen as undoing the damage that has been done to her perception, in using her sexuality to gain the upper hand and get her revenge. Where *Suicide Squad* viewed the character from a distance, as a result objectifying her, *Birds of Prey* shows Quinn punishing a man who attempts to solicit sexual favours as an exchange. Thus, she enacts the teen femme fatale figure's dilemma, in 'trying to live as a (teenage) girl in an environment which insists that girls' only power is their sexuality, and yet judges and vilifies them for publicly utilising it' (Farrimond 70).

These instances allow for Quinn to be understood as an anti-hero, a figure who is presented as being 'complex and troubled rather than simply wicked', blurring the lines between good and evil (Poore 11). Furthermore, her history of escaping from an abusive relationship creates a mythic tale of successfully escaping a bad situation. Consequent narratives featuring Quinn enable her to reiterate this story time and again, and she is able to present the idea of successfully emerging from under evil authorities and remaining faithful to her true self. Yet she does not adopt the patriarchal rule of the Law, continuing the criminal lifestyle of burglary, physical violence and other crimes of the sort. Quinn's heroism is not read to be the same as Wonder Woman, who stands as an example of what is possible. Instead, Quinn is familiar, originating from an archetype that, now, eludes strict definition and thus allows for multiplicity to exist in identifying with her. Harris defines an anti-hero as 'generally on the side of good, but is unstable and uses morally dubious methods' (313). Quinn's ancestry in the femme fatale, the monstrous

woman, and yet her generally good intentions to ensure the upliftment of herself and her friends thus place her as an anti-hero.

She only ever physically hurts people who have hurt her, not innocents. This is most evident when she breaks into the police station to retrieve Cassandra Cain. Instead of using bullets that could physically harm the police officers who stand in her way, she uses bean bags, confetti bombs and gas bombs. Her intention is not to kill the officers, she wants to gain information on Cassandra and to get her out. The officers are still slightly injured, but they are mostly left unconscious, no blood is spilt. Even when she has the ability to steal one of the police's guns, she does not. She sticks to her confetti and colourful gas bombs. This colourful chaos that surrounds Harley's violence is a visual trope that follows her into *The Suicide Squad*, and could be read as either her perception of the world when engaging in such violence or just her state of mind.

Something else to note about this scene is that though she does not harm the police officers, she does not seem to care too much for the criminals. She will spill blood, break bones, dislocate all the knees she can as long as they belong to criminals or mercenaries themselves. And when the mercenaries use guns and bullets with the intent to kill, she instead chooses creative weapons, amusing herself in the process. She wields her baseball bat with expertise and laughs at her ability to beat the bad guys in fun ways. Not that she cannot shoot, she incapacitates one of the mercs who tries to take away Cassandra with one bullet. But again, when Montoya stands in her way, she chooses theatrics over actual harm, hitting Montoya in the face with the phone that she was told to drop.

After obtaining Cassandra and learning that she ingested the diamond, Harley chooses to offer the kid laxatives and various other methods of safely excreting the diamond. Though she threatens Cain with a knife, she does not actually use it, managing to find a friendship with Cain. Harley herself has not had a lot of female companionship thus far in her live-action films,

and Cain's indifference towards the Joker and her awe of Harley make Harley realise that it was 'kinda nice having the kid around'. And because they trust each other and become such quick friends, Harley's betrayal hurts both of them that much more. Acting in her own self-interest, Harley makes a deal with Sionis to hand over the girl. Later, when Cassandra is rescued and Harley is recovering from being drugged by Zsasz, Cassandra tells Harley how she thought Harley would be different from the rest of the world. Harley shrugs and apologises, 'I'm sorry kid. I'm just a terrible person I guess.' Later, she fights all of Sionis's army and follows Sionis and Cain to the pier, now that the latter is being held captive by the Black Mask. When she thinks everything has failed, Harley admits to Cassandra, 'you made me want to be a less terrible person'. Harley's admission helps her regain Cassandra's trust, and the two defeat Sionis together.

Harley tells Montoya in the final scene that she is used to people underestimating her, something she has to actively fight against to prove her true abilities. It is a fight that action heroines are bound to encounter, as historically they have served the purpose of being only the 'dominatrix by both breaking down and exploiting the boundaries between sexes' (Brown, *Dangerous Curves* 42). Quinn's portrayal in this film (and in *The Suicide Squad*) follows what Brown calls the modern action heroine, a transgressive foe who is 'both the subject and the object, the looker and the looked at, ass-kicker and sex-object', as discussed earlier in the chapter (*Dangerous Curves* 43). A consequence of being a comic book character imbued with 'raw bodily power' makes her that much more of a threat, the narrative of which this film explores (Brown, *Dangerous Curves* 48). As the conclusion elaborates in detail, Quinn's function as the protagonist leaves her characterisation not strictly on either side of the good/bad spectrum. She is made to be perceptive of her ambiguous status, unwilling to fit into any category that has thus far been used for female characters in superhero narratives.

Concluding Remarks

Harley Quinn could never have been considered one among the supervillains, though analysis of her characterisation as conducted by this thesis helps clarify what the term supervillain refers to. A major indicator of this would be in her origin – her introduction was as a henchwoman to the Joker in contrast to other major supervillains who are introduced on their own. Her entire arc, both in comics and in film formats, is about justifying her status as more than a henchwoman. Initially, Harley is demanding to be treated as a legitimate lover, not just the Joker's henchwoman. Her blind faith in him leads her on a path of abuse that is difficult to break out of. She manages to escape the abusive relationship and stand on her own two feet. At this point, Harley demands respect for the person she is on her own. She wants to be taken seriously, wants people to consider her as much a threat as they do the Joker – though they are now different people and quite dissimilar. The Joker would never stand up as a leader, the Joker would never give everything of himself to multiple people and the Joker could never fall in love. Harley does all this while beating up bad guys brutally, becoming a sort of accidental Robin Hood.

She constantly defends her friends from external threats, is the first to encounter the new threats and thoroughly enjoys herself in the process. *Suicide Squad* finds her being the only one able to trick the Enchantress and pierce through her heart. In *The Suicide Squad*, it is because she takes the crazy jump into Starro's eye that the oppressed – the Rats – are able to follow her and finish off the job, tearing through the would-be conqueror. And the Birds of Prey fighting together, forming an alliance against others who try to cause havoc over their city – was because Harley pointed out how their goals aligned. And as much as she loves bringing people together, she loves being with them as well. She makes friends easily, telling anyone who shares a kind word with her that they could be her friend. She is like a child, completely open to new experiences and new people, finding ways to entertain herself no matter where she is.

Considering the long-running history of the ‘monstrous’ women in cinema and popular culture, Quinn’s portrayal is not one that lacks any issues in previous iterations of this trope. As mentioned, Quinn’s narrative is forever bound to that of the Joker, the Batman and any subsequent groups she becomes a part of. Like the femme fatales and action heroines, Quinn’s sexual threat is one that has been spelled out time and again through overtly revealing and impractical costumes. Hers is a narrative of agency, only by her own hand is she able to portray her truth. With *Harley Quinn #0*, the writers experimented with multiple well-known comic book artists of the time, and through the course of the comic book, ‘let’ Harley be drawn how she would choose for her first solo comic run. Similarly, it was when actress Margot Robbie produced *Birds of Prey* that Quinn’s portrayal in live-action film was deemed ‘a celebration of the female gaze’ (Hassan). The ‘female gaze’ here continues to indicate the ‘creative’ potential in a narrative that is creatively controlled and lead by the woman herself (Williams 145).

Female villainy, as has been established in the previous sections of this chapter, has been a part of the zeitgeist across media formats, and across genres, for many years. Harley Quinn is not the first comic book villainess to make it to the big screen, but is the one who has had three films – with one of them being a solo adventure. Her ability to take control of the narrative is what this chapter aimed to achieve. In *Suicide Squad* and *The Suicide Squad*, Harley’s individual arc is essential to the main storyline of the film. Her own film was set up as being an introduction to a team of female superheroes, but instead spent most of it focusing on Harley’s growth. While other comic book villainesses like Catwoman, Poison Ivy, Hela and Mystique have had multiple appearances in their respective cinematic worlds, none has managed to make the narrative of their respective films their own story quite as much as Quinn has.

As this chapter has detailed, Quinn’s position is neither entirely good nor bad. She is written as a neo-noir femme fatale, in the sense that she is independent and is able to fight those

who victimise her while exhibiting a 'mischievous sexual fluidity' (Bray 38). She is also, at times, the 'embodiment of motely, ... a playful and compassionate psychopath who has achieved self-efficacy' (McCrystal 169). On film, she abides by the tropes set forth by her ancestors, becoming the monstrous woman, the femme fatale and the sex kitten as the mood suits. Quinn is unique in her ability to represent multiple ideas and tropes at once, appearing as a character self-aware enough to encompass varying identities in a deliberately chosen 'spicy package', referring to her own active sexuality.

Conclusion

The main objective of this thesis was to understand the representations of three supervillains – Thanos, the Joker and Harley Quinn – in films that explored each respective villain's narrative. This thesis finds that the three villains become the central point of a narrative that is generally focused on the superhero. In looking for what happens when the villain takes the centre stage in a narrative, the thesis identifies that such narratives are not necessarily revolutionary, as they have been a part of popular consciousness since the mid-eighteenth century. Tracing the history of supervillains from their origins in Gothic novels to their popular presence in superhero films of the last few years, this thesis identifies a particular version of villainy that has been the most enduring in popular culture through the years. This villain gained popularity early on, and is an archetype that has a sustained presence across media and genres. Thus, the definition of the supervillain as undertaken by this thesis is one that directly descends from the Gothic archetype of the Satanic, or the Devil. Responding to the cultural anxieties of each generation, the supervillain reemerges, taking shape to threaten the status quo through mysterious means.

The Gothic mode functions as more than just a source of comparison in the study, as this thesis activates the Gothic mode as a theoretical framework in analysing the superhero narrative. In doing so, this thesis is able to focus specifically on the supervillains who, as proven in earlier chapters, are highly inspired by characters from Gothic literature. Having delineated the differences between the Gothic elements of terror and horror, this thesis is able to identify the effect that the supervillains analysed here have upon the narrative, and thereby their long-standing popularity. Further, the Gothic mode's form of serial narrative acts as yet another similarity between the two: its effects are clear in the study's utilisation of the mobile signifier. Just as was found for Gothic literature that evil in different shapes and forms had a constant and overwhelming presence in the mode, superhero narratives depend heavily on the

supervillain. These similarities made the influence of Gothic on the superhero narrative overtly explicit, which aided this study's focus on the supervillain. The thesis takes for granted the multiple similarities between the two genres, and at different points of the supervillain's narrative arcs finds that the subjects analysed in this thesis embody different elements of Gothic evil. Just as Gothic evil has shifted with respect to the evils of the time, the supervillains parts of this thesis are found to embody multiple forms of villainy based on the narrative. For example, while the Joker embodies the unknown fear in *The Dark Knight*, he is a sympathetic figure in *Joker*.

Understanding the archetype of the supervillain across multiple decades and through multiple regenerations was done by using concepts of the mobile signifier, introduced by Bennett and Woollacott in their analysis of James Bond (19). As a mobile signifier, this thesis finds that the supervillain functions as a sign of the anxieties that arise out of each generation and draws on and elaborates this archetype. As has been examined in each of the chapters, Thanos represents the threat of climate change, Fleck's Joker represents the crisis of masculinity and Quinn presents a case of redemption for the postfeminist sensibilities that have been a part of media directed towards women. Every iteration of the supervillain has represented the unknown: the fear that is associated with new ideas and new technology or the fear associated with the degeneration of human morals and values. They were situated in elements of horror, terror and the monstrous other. As the monstrous other became more civilised, the supervillain took the form of the mad scientist – manipulating people and nature itself to serve their purposes. The supervillains then rear their heads in superhero narratives, thriving in the legacy their predecessors left them but empowered with the unearthly powers that their science-fiction-inspired writers granted them.

Further, the thesis was able to use the gendered connotations of the mobile signifier to understand the effect of gender in the narrative. Lacan's phallic implications of the mobile

signifier, as outlined in the Introduction, invite the other – that is, the feminine then to be read as containing multitudes. This is displayed in the various analyses across the chapters. Thanos and the Joker are able to achieve ‘heroic’ status by the end of their narratives as a result of their functioning against the status quo, as singular forces. In contrast, Harley Quinn achieves ‘heroic’ status by the end of her narrative as a result of working alongside her contemporaries, the Birds of Prey. With the delineation of the Male and Female Gothic plots, this thesis highlights superhero narrative itself as being highly gendered, thus impacting the characterisation of its actants. This was shown most prominently in the case of Harley Quinn, whereby across three live-action films Quinn is either highly objectified through the visual male gaze in a Male Plot, or brought into a community through a female gaze in a Female Plot. The first two chapters analysing Thanos and the Joker also find gender to be enacting a specific narrative that mirrors their respective counterparts in superhero narratives. Thanos mirrors Tony Stark’s Iron Man in displaying two versions of fatherhood – one that is sacrificial and one that is violent. The Joker mirrors the Batman’s multiple iterations, as the Joker’s masculinity is threatened by a violent society, whereas the Batman’s masculinity is reaffirmed. This thesis finds that the narrative and the narrator matter in examining supervillains, as their gender becomes yet another attribute through which an analysis for the narrative becomes fruitful.

Superhero narratives, in their original comic format, borrowed heavily from the various storytelling traditions that existed before them. Bainbridge even identifies that DC superheroes, specifically the Big Three – Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman – can be understood as a part of the ‘monomyth’ that Joseph Campbell refers to when studying the overarching myth of the hero, one that appears in multiple cultural and religious texts and one he finds persisted into

the twentieth century (Bainbridge 66; Campbell 3–49).¹⁰⁹ These traditional stories were repackaged for children, specifically for American teenaged boys, and could just as well have been retellings of Hercules, Orpheus and Athena,¹¹⁰ or Doc Savage, the Shadow and the Golden Amazon.¹¹¹ Sean Howe also notes the relevance of the ‘classicism’ of the superhero narrative that set it apart from the general fare found on the newspaper stands of the time (17). Thus, with every superhero, a villainous counterpart was also introduced. the narratives adopted by these creators were able to easily adapt to the times, and new formats were adopted to reiterate the original narratives that brought the format to such heights of popularity. The integration by the film industry of the superhero narrative was initially subject to poor reception, but once the technology was able to appropriately adapt the comic-book aesthetic into the blockbuster movie, these narratives have achieved great success. As is now well known, the superhero film is one of the most successful narrative tropes in live-action cinema, and it shows no hints of slowing down.

With the emergence of any new trend/genre in storytelling or filmmaking, various approaches to telling a story are brought to the forefront and explored. Collins calls such texts ‘hybrid narratives’ – narratives that ‘resist syntactic stabilisation but are still composed of ... generic artefacts ...’ (178). Thus, while each of the explored narratives in this thesis follows the rules of its pre-established world, they vary from the previous superhero texts by focusing on the one character that previous superhero narratives did not focalise their narratives through.¹¹² The Marvel Cinematic Universe thus far has eighteen films in which the

¹⁰⁹ Campbell analyses this continued relevance through the study of psychoanalysis guided by Freudian and Jungian schools of thought.

¹¹⁰ Greek heroes – here Bainbridge identifies the Greek heroes to be reflections upon which the superhero iconography could have been based. The basic traits of these Greek Gods/Demigods like that of strength, wit and wisdom are universal traits found in superheroes till date, but naturally each interpretation of the hero introduces new elements that make them relevant for the audiences it is written for (66).

¹¹¹ Popular pulp magazine characters who were a major inspiration for the superheroes to come. This connection has been discussed in the Introduction of this thesis.

¹¹² As has been mentioned, supervillains are as essential part of every superhero narrative and thus, have appeared in every superhero narrative set to film. However, these three texts focalise their narratives through the perspective of the supervillains, which is rare and why these texts are unique.

superheroes functioned as the main protagonists, with occasional insights into the supervillains, who would inevitably be defeated by the end of that film. *Infinity War* came to be as a result of all the films prior to its release—following the narrative trend of a super-powered protagonist, except in this case the supervillain was the protagonist. In a similar fashion, *Joker* followed the narrative of one of the most popular antagonists of the twentieth century. The Clown Prince of Crime never had a live-action narrative dedicated to himself until *Joker*, and the film takes this popularity for granted by turning the narrative on its head – displaying the story of a man who becomes the Joker. *Birds of Prey* was another film set within a cinematic universe, and it utilised material from the original animated show, comic books and previous live-action narratives together to present a new narrative. The chosen texts are thus hybrid texts, displaying varying levels of narratively motivated interactions with their surrounding texts.

The story of the superhero has existed and been a part of popular culture since the late 1930s, and consequently writers and artists have had multiple chances to explore different aspects of the superhero's story in detail. As a matter of course, the fact that films about supervillains exist should, therefore, not be much of a surprise. As has been discussed in the thesis, supervillains had earned their time under the spotlight much before the superhero narrative became popular. The increased focus on supervillains and the role of narrative theory towards this achievement bring to light the inherent genre flexibility that has been a part of the superhero narrative from its inception. This flexibility allows for any narrative to be a superhero narrative, any genre to be welcomed into the superhero narrative. Using Jenkins's comments on 'revisionist superhero narratives', in which he states that authors are afforded greater room in which to experiment with existing characters, each of the films studied as a part of this thesis is an example of that same attempt (Jenkins, 'Just Men in Tights' 19–20). The implications thus are that the superhero narrative's innate flexibility allows for genre lines to be crossed and

blended together, thus allowing for future narratives and genres to accommodate multiple elements into themselves.

This thesis focused on placing the supervillains in a historical context as much as it focused on the supervillains themselves. By doing so, this thesis sheds light on how essential the Gothic narratives are to the popular consciousness. This specific relationship has been explored in relation to the superhero by Bainbridge, who identifies heroes with monstrous appearances or powers derived from horror tropes (68). He further points out how the Spider-Man comics embody the melodramatic – which is defined by a set of elements in a story including moral polarities and schemes, extreme expression, overt villainy among others (69).¹¹³ It was a strength that even writer, artist and editor Stan Lee identified in the serial nature of the comic book format, with claims that there was ‘fun to make a superhero out of a monster!’ (Lee 120–121) or that it was ‘fun coming up with surprising twists and turns’ (Lee 133). Recurring Gothic elements become iconic and embedded in the superhero narrative because of the importance that these creators placed on these elements.

Serial narratives were also a major part of the Gothic’s presence in the magazines published in the late nineteenth century. The serialised nature of the MCU allowed for Thanos’s narrative to feel like an essential part of the MCU: his supervillainous status was thereby earned. The Joker’s long exposure in popular media allowed for multiple narratives to exist in parallel, all of which share an equal part of the mythos of the character. Quinn’s character growth from *Suicide Squad* to *The Suicide Squad* allows for the development of her character from an abused girlfriend to a villain in her own right. The serialised nature of comic book narratives and Gothic narratives is displayed in the texts analysed as a part of this thesis, each having successfully reached completion. In contrast, recent films in the MCU have attempted

¹¹³ Peter Brooks’s understanding of the melodramatic is used by Bainbridge, which is detailed in *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976).

to recreate the success of Thanos with Kang the Conqueror – yet another supervillain from Marvel’s comics who is shown as being defeated by Ant-Man in *Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantamania* (2023). Re-occurring presences and a clear hierarchy of power that was established in Thanos’s narrative did not occur in the case of Kang.

Of the three supervillains analysed here, Thanos most readily embodies the conventions of the classical supervillain. Just as Gothic villains were clearly characterised by their swarthy, caped outfits and overwhelming presence, Thanos’s quest in the comic books for the Infinity Gems reveals a similarly presented villain. His comic run from his introduction in ‘The Invincible Iron Man #55’ (1973) until ‘The Infinity War’ (1992) paints him to be a classical Gothic villain further by making the motive of his actions an overly dramatic but one-sided love for Death.¹¹⁴ He soliloquises constantly, has things to say about the state of the universe and the nobility of his mission and pities the superheroes who do not see the universe the way he does. Thanos in the MCU carries a similar way of thinking, pitying those who do not realise the nobility of his mission, feeling a surprising and yet overwhelming pain when he has to murder his adopted daughter Gamora to accomplish his mission. He embodies the melodramatic villain as identified by Guy Barefoot, one who ‘wore his villainy plainly on his face’ (Jones 96, 98; qtd. in Barefoot 93).

In comparison, the Joker and Harley Quinn present supervillainy differently, if they do so at all. In *Joker* (2019), Fleck’s descent into madness is a narrative arc that has been used multiple times, but using it as a cover for the Joker’s origin sheds a new light on how deep Joker’s villainy goes. A complete contrast to Joker is Harley Quinn, who started out as a henchwoman, a villain performing villainy just to gain her lover’s favour in the television show. The tale of the woman who turns to villainy after being abandoned by her scorned lover

¹¹⁴ Mistress Death is the Marvel Universe’s personification of death, narrativised to be a powerful cosmic entity. Thanos’s love for her stems out of a love for death itself, and his quest to gain power is just a quest to be as powerful as death – fulfilling his role as the Death drive (‘Death’).

is, once again, entrenched into popular culture, but Quinn turns that tale on its head and becomes an icon for those who fight everyday battles with controlling individuals in their lives.¹¹⁵

These three supervillains take the legacy of villainy that they were created out of and conform to, improve or break out of it. Thanos has proven to be the stereotypical supervillain by being exactly what he is designed to be. He follows all the rules laid out by his predecessors and even manages to succeed in his mission, with his 'destiny fulfilled'. The Joker has been an agent of chaos since he was first written, obsessed with the Batman and his ruin. By creating a narrative in which he is the hero, the one to be empathised with and the one to gain support from the masses, he goes beyond what supervillainy had been able to do so far. He creates a world with no order, no Batman to fight against. And in such a world, one with only pure evil around, the narrative of the underdog leading to a personal triumph is displayed, though in this case the underdog's triumph means that the Joker must win. It is a haunting victory, but a victory nonetheless. Harley Quinn does not care for being a supervillain, though she displays a penchant for it, enjoying the thrill of being on the wrong side of the law. Quinn's narrative is that of a protagonist learning of their true abilities, without the hindrance of a toxic relationship holding her back. Finding her autonomy in the male dominated world of superheroes and villains and carving out a place for herself is the main focus of Quinn's narrative.

An important vein throughout this thesis was the superhero's connection to Gothic novels, and this was found through the similarities in narrative structure that both the generic forms found in each other. As mentioned above, elements of the melodramatic are themselves entrenched in superhero comic books, and thereby, into the superhero narrative itself. Both genres were found to have thrived most in the seriality of their narrative structure, by leaving

¹¹⁵ In *The Ascendence of Harley Quinn*, scholars Owens, Bray, Liddell and Sinclair refer to Quinn as an icon frequently. In the same collection, Gallardo & Botello examine in detail why the term 'icon' suits Quinn, stating that she becomes one 'not by appealing to hegemony, but is instead beloved because of her psychological depth and how she opposes convention' (104).

audiences hanging for a certain period of time to wait for new information on their favourite characters. Both genres toyed with ideas and concepts of pre-modern thought, where the sacred and the mythological are replaced by science and technology (Bainbridge 74). One of Marvel's more popular forays into the film universe, *Blade*, told the story of a vampire – a demonic creature that gained popularity in novels of the Gothic era.¹¹⁶ This thesis further cemented the connection between the two genres by focusing specifically on the narrative structure of both, and by identifying a method of studying a particular character to understand the narrative function of the said character.

The superhero narrative's generic flexibility and its relationship with the Gothic mode aside, one of the most successful ways of telling a superhero story was to do so by exploring an origin story. These narratives elaborate on the superhero's alter ego, explain why they deserve such powers and how their superpowers only amplify the goodness that was already a part of the character. The character would have some tragedy in their childhood or in their present as justification for why this person deserves the powers more than any other. A jealous or power-hungry villain would show up, realising how this new protagonist threatens their plans. The villain would prove to be an equal to the superhero in their final match, but the superhero would always emerge victorious. Brown notes that such insistence on origin stories established characters unburdened by history, with characters being diminished to their most defining characteristics (*The Modern Superhero in Film and Television* 66). It was a pattern set up early on, and one that proved successful enough to continue. It is only fair, then, that supervillains would receive their own origin stories as well.

In a way, what the three analysed films do is provide origin stories for their respective protagonists. Although Thanos appeared in films prior, *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) is really

¹¹⁶ Jeffrey Brown notes how the film 'emphasised the vampire hunter aspect of the character rather than the superhero', further stressing how important elements of horror were for the success of the film (*The Modern Superhero in Film and Television* 22).

Thanos's first film. It is the film in which his character is explained, his motives are laid out and his mission becomes clear. While his previous appearances set him up as the supervillain for the Infinity Saga (Phase 1 to Phase 3 films of the MCU), *Infinity War* is when we really get to know Thanos. His black-and-white view of the universe, his arrogance and his surprising weakness for his daughter Gamora – all provide a full picture of what Thanos is all about, what his goals are and what lengths he will go to, to achieve his goals. In a line of dialogue, Thanos mentions that he is the only one in the universe with the will to act on correcting the universe by destroying half of all life. Such dialogue shows his blind dedication to his own mission and how he takes it upon himself to diffuse the curse on his destiny (McEvoy 24).

Mirroring Thanos, we have Tony Stark's heroism to contrast against. Stark has never been an out-and-out superhero, his boastful arrogance and reluctance to become an efficient team member proves as much. Tony uses his Iron Man suits (that he obsessed over for a long time) when his personal freedoms are threatened, or when he or someone he cares about is explicitly attacked. His version of heroism is to be on the defence at all times, to build a suit of armour around the world and protect all that he holds dear. Even in *Infinity War*, Stark realises that taking the fight to Thanos's planet, Titan, would keep those on Earth – his family and friends – safe. But for their safety, Stark has gone beyond what was ever thought possible. His suit advances by leaps and bounds with every iteration of his filmic continuity, his genius has no equal thus far and he is self-aware enough to admit it. These are all traits that Thanos recognises and appreciates, and even says as much when fighting Stark on Titan.

This effect that villains and heroes have of mirroring each other has been discussed briefly in the chapter on the Joker. Villains are written to present the opposing point of view, only to reveal the 'good' ideology of the superhero prevailing. Superman represents honesty, humanity and hard-working blue collars, while Lex Luthor represents the elite class, malevolence, jealousy and the overwhelming might of technology. The Batman stands for and

upholds social order, while the Joker acts as an agent of chaos, and so on. Such characters are created in opposition to each other by their respective creators. Some interesting narratives present differing versions of this formula, but most commonly, the supervillain will create the superhero. These narratives depict one character intentionally turning the other into an enemy, as opposed to their lives coincidentally crossing paths. *Unbreakable* (2000) presents a case study of such occurrences, with Elijah Price revealing himself to be the antagonist who manipulates protagonist David Dunn into accepting his super heroism, thereby proving to be a worthy opponent of the former. It only further proves that the duality between a superhero and their supervillain is essential to the narrative. But what happens when one of these two elements is not present at all in the narrative world?

Such is the case with *Joker* (2019) and *Birds of Prey* (2020). While Thanos has all the Avengers to fight against (and still emerges victorious), Fleck in *Joker* is presented as the empathetic character, whose struggle is most evidently examined by the film's narrative.¹¹⁷ He is the protagonist of the film, and it is the harshness of his world that leads to him embracing his true identity, that of the Joker. The pre-established heroes of that universe, that is, Bruce Wayne and Thomas Wayne, have not yet achieved their apotheosis and are narratively turned against the 'good' that they usually represent. Fleck has no 'good' to act against, and by default through following his point of view, he becomes the 'good' that must always accompany a story alongside evil. Evil is ever present in this narrative, the city itself is a character that oppresses all its inhabitants. Once Fleck realises his potential to affect change and to inspire the masses, he embraces the identity that he has been longing for, the one that people are celebrating, the Joker.

¹¹⁷ It should be noted that the film encourages such a reading of the Joker/Arthur Fleck, conscious of the fact that multiple interpretations of this narrative may emerge.

This is his origin story,¹¹⁸ in the sense that he overcomes the challenging environs of Gotham City, embracing a power that has been only his and inspiring the masses to follow in his ideology. With the Batman unavailable to fight his dogma, the Joker's chaos reigns supreme. As opposed to other superhero narratives in which the victory of the protagonist is a victory for all, the Joker's victory is not played as a success by the filmmakers. The background score is haunting throughout the film, but especially so in the Joker's final scene on top of the overturned police car. Songs like 'That's Life' and 'Send in the Clowns' are played as ironies – these songs celebrate the paths that life takes for different people, and still work as uplifting musical motifs that convey the Joker's tragic rise to villainy. Fleck's life has been one struggle after another, he is constantly burdened with taking Sisyphean steps up to his doom. But upon realising his true potential – that of killing people and generally inspiring chaos, realising how good and true that feels and then further seeing how the public responds positively to his actions – naturally makes him want to embrace that identity fully.

Harley Quinn's film also shows her to be the protagonist, as is made obvious from the very beginning of the film through the first-person narration and the stylised retelling of Harley's origins. However, her upgrade to the protagonist is quite different from that of the Joker, and only slightly different from that of Thanos. All three characters have had portrayals in films before: Harley's first appearance in *Suicide Squad* (2016) is quite significant but not ominous as Thanos's appearances prior to *Infinity War*. We are told through flashbacks, narrated by other people, the story of what led to Harley's career as a supervillain in her first stint at live-action film, *Suicide Squad*. In *Birds of Prey*, we learn the story from Harley's perspective, which works to reveal how essential Harley was to the Joker's schemes, and most importantly how transforming into Harley Quinn from psychiatrist Harleen Quinzel was a

¹¹⁸ Possibly just one version of it, possibly told by Arthur himself to the psychiatrist in the final scene of the film.

decision she made consciously. This film does not pretend that her previous appearances did not happen, the way that *Joker* is set in a universe separate from the other DC films of the time. Instead, her most recent live-action portrayal is shown to be a part of her larger narrative arc that began with *Batman: The Animated Series*.¹¹⁹ Artworks showing her appearances in comics helmed by different writing teams are also shown, making this Harley a combination of everything that has happened in her overarching narrative, both in comics and on screen.

Her rise to villainy is told from her perspective and dealt with by giving her agency in her villainy, but this film goes beyond the label of ‘supervillain’ to show Harley as she is – a harlequin jester.¹²⁰ She is undoubtedly a villain who commits crimes and enjoys doing so, but she does not sadistically harm people; conversely, she manages to protect those she cares for in her journey to self-discovery. *Birds of Prey* is her true origin just for the simple fact that it is in this narrative that Harley learns the true extent of her empathic abilities beyond ‘loving’ the Joker. Her arc in *The Suicide Squad* (2021) reinforces this message, solidifying her status as a chaotic anti-hero of sorts. And with her being the anti-hero, each of her standalone/subsequent narratives introduces villains who are worse than her. There is no clear absolute good in her narratives, just villains who are worse than the protagonists. The *Birds of Prey*, a superhero team that has never included Harley among its teammates,¹²¹ still does not include her by the end of this film. Harley encourages the rest of the heroes to work together, but forms the team with them just because the antagonist Sionis targeted her and her friend, Cassandra.

¹¹⁹ Margot Robbie has thus far portrayed all live-action versions of the character, which makes it easier for the character history to remain somewhat uniform.

¹²⁰ Cia Jackson’s chapter ‘Harlequin Romance: The Power of Parody and Subversion’ explores Harley’s status as a harlequin jester (17), but scholars have also related her to ideas of the femme fatale (Bray 31) and the motely (McCrystal 169).

¹²¹ They are a group originally established in the comic books and have had appearances in television shows like *Justice League Unlimited* and *Batman: The Brave and The Bold*.

Major studies have been undertaken to understand the action film genre (Brown; Tasker), but further studies into the supervillain and the superhero narrative would undoubtedly prove to be fruitful in testing the genre's flexibility. Furthermore, the serial nature of storytelling that superhero stories have existed in allows for expansive analyses, but long-lasting franchises like the *James Bond* franchise, *Mission Impossible* franchise, *Indiana Jones* franchise or even the *Jumanji* franchise could also benefit with such studies. While only some of those franchises carry a singular narrative through the years, their long-standing relevance, and methods of continuing to remain relevant, would be interesting places to begin such a study. Many of the stylistic or narrative tropes present in these films borrow from trends that were established for, or inspired by, the superhero narrative – which in turn were inspired by science fiction novels.

This thesis was not particularly interested in the adaptation/remediation aspect of superhero films either, although an inquiry into those details would no doubt prove to be fruitful. Such studies have been undertaken by scholars (Jeffries; Burke; Morton), but without much insight into the supervillain. Each of the supervillains studied in this thesis, and others such as Dr Doom, Deathstroke, Sinestro and more, have had comic runs with the narratives focused on them (Meenan). As has been the norm thus far, the superhero film itself famously focused only on the superheroes of these films, and any insights into their visual and stylistic cues were attributed to the protagonist's personal narrative arc, the one audiences are supposed to identify with. By looking at films with supervillains acting as the audiences' stand-in, it would be interesting to note how stylistic choices undertaken by filmmakers add to or detract from the narrative. Creating such filmic texts, then, could prove constructive to establish the supervillain as a fully realised character, thus providing more incentive for the superhero to mete out justice.

One example of a supervillain taking over narrative control could be found in the various iterations of Magneto in the *X-Men* films. From 2000 to 2019, multiple films in the *X-*

Men franchise have featured Magneto as a major character of the narrative. When the Master of Magnetism is not the main villain of the narrative, he is shown to be an ally of the X-Men, fighting against a greater threat that mutant-kind faces. Magneto's villainy was complicated years after his introduction into the comics, with a new history being attributed to his character. According to this new history, Magneto's childhood as a prisoner in the camps of Auschwitz was explored, and the trauma of those events was now made to define every action he took in the future. This defining moment in Magneto's own history became a defining moment for every iteration of the character thereafter, with each of the franchises' introductory films (*X-Men* (2000) and *X-Men: First Class* (2011)) beginning the narrative with Magneto's childhood and an ensuing traumatic event – the death of his mother.

A deeper analysis of Magneto and his multiple appearances in film would reveal his portrayal to mirror that which was found among Romantic writers of Gothic literature. The Romantic Hero, Hero-Villain or the Byronic Hero was a popular trope among the Romantic writers, portrayed as a figure of sympathy, cursed to carry out his destiny of revenge and destruction. As Stoddart finds, the hero-villain is characterised by their dual markings, of both victimhood and villainy (176). Botting further adds that the hero-villain 'is rarely denounced as the cause of evil himself', but is unable to act in any other way (*Gothic* 92). Magneto's new altered history, which is brought up frequently, then allows him to be read as the hero-villain. His tendencies to act out in anger against those who threaten him and his cause (that of mutant supremacy) lead to his treatment as a supervillain. He is consistently placed in opposition to Xavier's idealistic worldview; where the former views humanity with contempt and wariness, the latter is willing to accommodate humanity in order to maintain peaceful relations. A more detailed analysis of Magneto would undoubtedly be fruitful, and functions to open up the debate to more supervillains and their potential Gothic mirrors.

The focus on narrative throughout this thesis was intentional, as this thesis intended to understand how a superhero story adapts to a supervillain taking the helm of the narrative. The Gothic era's influence upon this particular narrative tradition was an important finding and one that opens possibilities for future readings between the two genres. Scholars like Barefoot (94), Bullen (182) and Harris (307) among others have identified the similarities between the two genres and have conducted studies into Gothic villains and superheroes who mirror them. The scope of this thesis was limited to focusing on three supervillains, and only briefly mentioned certain iconic villains from the Gothic novels. However, by looking at the Gothic tradition as just that – a generic tradition rather than focusing on specific literary works that paved the way for multiple creative replicants – this thesis was able to understand the wide-spanning impact of the Gothic tradition on multiple creative forms of art, two of which are the comic book and film. Specific examples from Gothic novels will find specific imitations in current popular culture, and this only speaks of the long-lasting impact that the Gothic tradition has had on popular culture. Future films could continue this tradition of using material from the Gothic mode to inspire character motivations or stylistic effects adopted when adapting comic book material onto film. Gothic villains are iconic for reflecting on the anxieties of their cultural time period – the same trend could continue to migrate over to the superhero narrative as well, as it has done thus far.

Alternate accounts of the superhero's story, such as television shows like *The Boys* (2019–present) and *Invincible* (2021–present), add to the narrative tradition, while still separating themselves from the two big producers (Marvel and DC) by reframing what the consequences of heroism and superpowers could be. Such retellings of the superhero story serve to add to the mythos of the superhero. As Ndalians states, 'The representations of the mythology ... have become part of the mythology and, as such, the *telling* of the myth has become *as* important as the myth that is told' (286, original emphasis). Jenkins similarly writes

that ‘to be alternative to the superhero genre is still to be defined by – or at least in relation to – that genre’ (‘Just Men in Tights’ 18). As has been mentioned earlier, the genre’s ability to take on such wide varieties of retellings further solidifies its evolving relevance in popular culture. If truly *anyone* can be a superhero, then audiences will see representations of themselves as superheroes. If *anyone* could turn into a supervillain, it remains to be seen what effect villainy will have on individuals and communities.

Any new films and projects furthering the superhero’s story will no doubt be abundant with subject matter to study, whether it be through the narrative, the creative process in adaptation or the impact of these industrial changes on these stories. Scholarship in superhero films has thus far generated extensive debates in the academy, but its flexible nature allows for the possibility for more. Generic trends, stylistic trends, narrative and even performances are ever evolving in the superhero films, and looking back will offer ample opportunity to theorise. The three characters that form the main analysis have created something unique and offered a new perspective to a well-known story. The superhero narrative’s generic flexibility is proof that, when it comes to new narratives or new methods of studying these narratives, the possibilities are endless. The only constant would be that good and evil both exist, with superheroes and supervillains who are constantly challenging the other to evolve and become stronger than before.

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Spider-Man. Directed by Sam Raimi, Performances by Tobey Maguire, Kirsten Dunst, Willem Dafoe, James Franco, J. K. Simmons, Rosemary Harris, Marvel Enterprise, Sony Pictures Releasing, 2002.

Suicide Squad. Directed by David Ayer, performances by Will Smith, Margot Robbie, Jared Leto, Viola Davis, Joel Kinnaman, Jai Courtney, Cara Delevigne, DC Entertainment, RatPac-Dune Entertainment, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2016.

The Avengers (or *Avengers Assemble*). Directed by Joss Whedon, performances by Robert Downey Jr., Chris Evans, Mark Ruffalo, Chris Hemsworth, Scarlett Johansson, Jeremy Renner, Tom Hiddleston, Samuel L. Jackson, Marvel Studios, Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2012.

The Boys. Eric Kripke, developer. Sony Pictures Television, 2019–present.

The Dark Knight. Directed by Christopher Nolan, performances by Christian Bale, Heath Ledger, Gary Oldman, Aaron Eckhart, Maggie Gyllenhaal, Michael Caine, Morgan Freeman, Syncopy, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2008.

The Dark Knight Rises. Directed by Christopher Nolan, performances by Christian Bale, Tom Hardy, Gary Oldman, Anne Hathaway, Marion Cotillard, Joseph Gordon Levitt, Michael Caine, Morgan Freeman Syncopy, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2012.

The Incredible Hulk. Directed by Louis Leterrier, performances by Edward Norton. Liv Tyler, Tim Roth, William Hurt, Marvel Studios, Valhalla Motion Pictures, 2008.

‘The Laughing Fish’, *Batman: The Animated Series*, written by Paul Dini, directed by Bruce Timm, Warner Brothers Animation, 1993.

The Lego Batman Movie. Directed by Chris McKay, performances by Will Arnett, Zach Galifianakis, Michael Cera, Rosario Dawson, Ralph Fiennes, RatPac Entertainment, DC Entertainment, Warner Bros Pictures, 2017. *Thor*. Directed by Kenneth Branagh, performances Chris Hemsworth, Natalie Portman, Tom Hiddleston, Anthony Hopkins, Rene Russo, Idris Elba, Stellan Skarsgard, Marvel Studios, Paramount Pictures, 2011.

The Suicide Squad. Directed by James Gunn, performances by Idris Elba, John Cena, Margot Robbie, Joel Kinnaman, Daniela Melchor, Sylvester Stallone, Viola Davis, Peter Capaldi, Atlas Entertainment, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2021.

Thor: The Dark World. Directed by Alan Taylor, performances by Chris Hemsworth, Natalie Portman, Tom Hiddleston, Anthony Hopkins, Christopher Eccleston, Idris Elba, Stellan Skarsgard, Marvel Studios, Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2013.

Transformers. Directed by Michael Bay, Performances by Shia LaBeouf, Megan Fox, Josh Duhamel, Peter Cullen, John Turturro, Paramount Pictures, 2007.

Unbreakable. Directed by M. Night Shyamalan, Performances by Bruce Willis, Samuel L. Jackson, Robin Wright, Spencer Treat Clark, Touchstone Pictures, Buena Vista Pictures, 2000.

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