



Psychotic or Psychedelic?: Reinterpreting 'Madness' in Alan Moore's *Killing Joke*

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Abstract: The United States of America in the late 1980s was still dealing with the reverberations of the Counterculture Movement of the sixties. The epoch, characterized by the amalgamation of native antiquity and post-World-War Americanism, witnessed a reinterpretation of the rebel, the mad and the criminal. Alan Moore's *Killing Joke*, published in 1988 is primarily about Joker, Batman's antithesis, the supervillain to the superhero. The graphic novel dismantles the chronological narrativity as the past and the present conglomerate frequently, providing the readers with the origin story of the supervillain as well as his present psychotic condition. Placing Moore's Joker in the context of the Counterculture Movement and considering the use of psychedelic therapy in criminal asylums, the paper attempts to reconsider Joker's 'madness'. The paper intends to map the overlapping coordinates of psychosis and psychedelia and analyze the socio-cultural position of the modern age Joker.

The 1960s in the United States of America is characterized by the emergence of almost a decade long Counterculture Movement, the repercussions of which were evident even in the eighties. The movement witnessed multiple anti-establishment phenomena along with an increased abuse of psychoactive drugs and their experimental use as therapeutic substances. However, it would be unfair to locate the use of these drugs within the strict boundaries of any temporality. American anthropologist, Raoul Weston La Barre, in his book, *The Peyote Cult* (1938), referred to hallucinogens as 'narcotics.' He located its usage by the native Americans, and noted the traditional high value placed on abnormal psychedelic states by them. Hallucinogenic plants and fungi were used by the natives as a medium to connect with the divine; see God or 'acquire' prophetic powers. According to Barre, since the new age America did not undergo much significant geo-political crises like invasions, interpolations or even migration (though all these are highly contested historiographically), the former has inherited a larger chunk of the 'Old World.' His idea of 'Old World America' incorporates the elaborate span of time, beginning from the Neanderthal Age till the onset of colonization. Paul Devereux, therefore, observes in his book, *The Long Trip: A Prehistory of Psychedelia* (1997):

At this point its cultural remains are clearer and stronger in the New World than in most of the Old. This fact is important for understanding the antiquity and context of plant hallucinogen use, and also is a factor in exploring (as we will) its most overlooked remnant: the physical marks it left on the land. (Devereux 109)

Hallucinogens have found innumerable synonyms during the process of chemical categorization: psychotomimetic, psychotropic, psychoactive, followed by psychedelic which transpired an entire subculture. The term 'psychedelic' emerged as a congregation of the notions reflected by Aldous Huxley and Humphry Osmond. Both wanted to devise a term that focused on the mystical and healing aspect of the hallucinogens while disregarding the pathological connotations associated with it. Osmond coined the term 'psychedelic' in 1957, deriving the word from the Greek 'psyche' meaning soul and 'delos' meaning to portray, against Huxley's 'phanerothyme'. Therefore, Osmond's psychedelic means soul or mind-portraying. LSD or Lysergic Acid Diethylamide became a leading tool for psychiatric treatment in the 1950s, as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) intended to use it as a 'truth-serum'. However, it is pertinent to note that the influence of LSD transcended the institutional boundaries and seduced the contemporary youth owing to its ability to create temporary escapades from the real and the ugly. Timothy Leary, the epitome of the psychedelic movement of the sixties, attempted to portray the need for chemical experimentation with LSD, in order to dismantle the ontological binaries and consequently question the hierarchical American society, as observed by Peter Conner, in *White Hand Society: the Psychedelic Partnership between Timothy Leary and Allen Ginsberg* (2010). In *Birth of a Psychedelic Culture: Conversations about Leary, the Harvard Experiments, Millbrook and the Sixties* (2010), Leary says, "Drugs are going to become a permanent part of American culture" (177). Amidst all this, it becomes pertinent to note that psychedelics were massively used in asylums to deal with schizophrenia and other mental disorders. Alan Moore's graphic novel, titled *Killing Joke*, published in 1988, with illustrations by Brian Bolland, deals with the American superhero Batman's nemesis, Joker, who is otherwise an unnamed human character, who creates havoc in Gotham City, with his psychotic brutality. In my paper, I intend to place the character at the continuing trajectory of the Counterculture Movement and re-interpret his 'madness' through psychedelia.

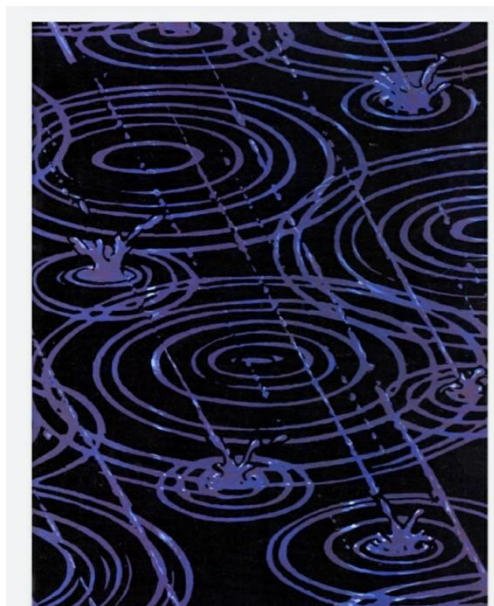


Fig. 1



Fig. 2

The novel begins with an eerie silence, graphically manifested through an enveloping panel of psychedelic patterns created by raindrops. The single panel disintegrates into smaller panels with the patterns gradually reducing. The readers' view is widened as details from the surroundings are gradually incorporated into the panels. The hypnotic silence created by the psychedelic patterns is penetrated by the blinding flashlight of the Batmobile and the readers are slowly taken to the entrance to the Arkham Asylum, a confinement for 'the criminally insane'. The table-topper at the reception, reading 'You don't have to be crazy to work here, but it helps,' makes us wonder if 'madness' is a choice. The entrance of Batman's nemesis, Joker demonstrates the chaotic alignment of the panels, therefore reflecting his chaotic and unorganized consciousness. Moore begins his graphic novel with the manifestation of Batman and Joker as binaries. While he uses dark somber colors for the Superhero, the darkness symbolizing his dark vigilante status, Joker is represented through bright neon colors and convoluted patterns which are the primary characteristics of psychedelic art. His bright purple suit and green hair, giving him the look of a 'hippie', is presented to contrast Bruce Wayne's sophistication through Batman's monochromatic attire. Albert Hofmann, in his *LSD, My*

Problem Child: Reflections on Sacred Drugs, Mysticism and Science, noted his experience after synthesizing LSD in his laboratory for the first time:

At home, I lay down and sank into a not unpleasant intoxicated-like condition, characterized by an extremely stimulated imagination. In a dreamlike state, with eyes closed, I perceived an uninterrupted stream of fantastic pictures, extraordinary shapes with intense, kaleidoscopic play of colors (12)



Fig. 3: Use of strong, vibrant colors to reflect the psychotic fits

The psychedelic aesthetics, that vividly represents the American socio-political crises of the mid-20th Century, simultaneously challenges the Cartesian dualisms while developing the postmodern ontological self-reflectivity. The psychedelic self, therefore emerges as not an unconscious self but an 'altered' self. Joker's altered self, which depicts psychedelic tendencies, is not disjunct from the real. He frequently portrays social and political consciousness. Moore's Joker delineates how the 'mind' and the 'body' are interconnected and hence it is impossible to catalog them as two separate distinct blocks of binaries as his somatic deformity immediately triggers his mental state. Psychedelic



aesthetics do not attempt to portray anything beyond the socially real, but rather make space for the Others or the ones relegated to the margins, by witnessing the 'altered states of consciousness and counterculture identities and social structures' as observed by Lana Cook in her thesis, "Altered States: The American Psychedelic Aesthetic" (2014). What Cook refers to an 'altered' consciousness, has been referred to as a new psychology by Nietzsche, or more precisely a "physio-psychology...daring to descend to the depths" (12) and eventually "translate man back into Nature...the eternal basic text of homo natura..." (12), in his *Beyond Good and Evil*. Nietzsche's status of 'homo natura' (79), the metamorphosed human nature, is acquired through knowledge and probity. Similarly, Joker's transformed self comes after the realization of his loss, depravity and physical deformity. Despite his sadistic criminality, the supervillain in Moore's graphic novel emerges to engage in an honest dialogue as he attempts to portray how the gap between the 'civilized' and the 'uncivilized' can be very easily dissipated. Daniel Berthold-Bond, in his discourse, "Hegel, Nietzsche, and Freud on Madness and Unconscious," regards 'madness' as the inverted reflection of the 'developed consciousness' (193), with an altered notion of rationality that connects the self with the world. Therefore, 'madness' becomes a reflection of the 'unconscious' or vice versa. Freud in his *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) observes the 'unconscious' as the 'true physical reality' whereas in *The Ego and the Id* (1923), he regards 'consciousness' as the surface of the mental apparatus.

Moore's *Batman: The Killing Joke* shows a similar representation of its superhero and supervillain: The rich, privileged, organized, civilized and rational mind trying to save America and its people, by adhering to the 'book' of law, against the poor, marginalized, chaotic, uncivilized, mad Joker killing and raping. In Hegelian dialectics, as noted in *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind* by William Wallace (1978), 'consciousness' emerges as the civilized state and unconscious as the uncivilized state. He further establishes that the unconscious mind is segregated from the real, actual world.

This resonates with Freud's notion of neurosis which talks about a condition that cannot distinguish between 'reality' and 'phantasy', and consequently feels a repulsion from the real and hence manifests a withdrawal "from the ego and its laws." Joker confesses that he doesn't remember what led to his delirium but he is conscious of his madness.

Something like that happened to me, you know. I...I'm not exactly sure what it was. Sometimes I remember it one way, sometimes another...but my point is...my point is, I went crazy. (Moore 23)

Moore however depicts what led Joker to attain his psychotic state. The flashback looks at Joker as an unnamed struggling stand-up comedian who left his regular job of an engineer to pursue his American dream. The anonymity of the character creates a sense of inclusion; his poor, marginalized status reflecting the other side of the economically blooming America in the post-Depression decades. Bolland here uses gray and faded soft purple tones to reflect the character's psychological distress. His wife Jeannie, inspector Gordon, his daughter Barbara, the policemen are portrayed in human, yellowish tones, therefore being presented only through their conscious state. There are multiple oscillations between the character's conscious past and the psychotic present; shifts that show a cinematic suddenness almost like a schizophrenic movement. It is pertinent to note that Joker's transformation to the chemically deformed, psychotic state is presented by the change in the

background color as the somber dull tones are replaced by neon psychedelic patterns again. We can label Joker's madness into two chronological segments: his delirious state after his pregnant wife's death leading to his accident at the chemical factory that permanently disfigures him: his face bleached white and his hair neon green, and his chaotic state after his prolonged treatment at the Arkham Asylum, with psychoactive drugs.



Fig. 4: Transition of Joker showing psychedelic patterns and vibrant colors.

One of the significant reasons for the increasing use of psychedelic drugs in medical therapy in the 1960s was the belief that these drugs can reduce the guilt feeling after an act of 'criminality' and even work on anxiety and depression by creating hallucinogenic effects. There were two kinds of psychedelic therapy: one that intended to excavate the 'psychodynamic unconscious' through psycholytic therapy that required small doses but multiple sessions of injecting LSD, mescaline or psilocybin and the other is the conversion process or the psychedelic process which uses larger doses of LSD aiming to primarily reform the criminals. Lester Grinspoon and Rick Doblin in their "Psychedelics as Catalysts of Insight-Oriented Psychotherapy" (2001) examined the case study of three different people: a 55-year-old man suffering from anxiety, a murderess and an alcoholic laborer and their respective experiences after the ingestion of LSD. Joker during his psychotic acts of criminality, provides his readers with a glimpse of his rationality, conscious, depressive state as he makes pertinent revelatory justifications:



Memory is so treacherous. One moment you're lost in a carnival of delights with poignant childhood aromas, the flashing neon of puberty, all that sentimental candy-floss...the next, it leads you somewhere you don't want to go.. (Moore 24)

Here, memory becomes a reflection of the conscious self or rather the trajectory that leads to the conscious self. Arthur Robinson in his "Memory and Consciousness" observes that memory emerges from an unconscious state which is a 'purely spiritual realm where "...the function of consciousness is a choice...Freedom is pushed back into the shadows, and we should be most free when we are least clearly conscious.'" (321). Moore's Joker therefore finds liberation in insanity. This sense of liberation emerging from a sense of acceptance of the self is also what psychedelic therapy does.

However, this acceptance of the self demonstrates an ambiguity. While psychedelic therapy talks about primarily the acceptance of the rational self with all its failures and setbacks, Joker's self-acceptance leads to a stronger establishment of his psychosis. His glorious declaration, "...Remember there's always madness. Madness is the emergency exit" (21), emerges as a tool against his conscious state where the ghost of memories haunt him: "Memories can be vile, repulsive little brutes like children I suppose..." (21)

Freud in his *Project for a Scientific Psychology* looks at memory as the primary component of nervous tissue that bears the capacity of immediate permanent alteration of the psyche owing to a single occurrence. This Freudian notion is reverberated in Joker's words as he says: "I've demonstrated there's no difference between me and everyone else! All it takes is one bad day to reduce the sanest man alive to lunacy." (24)

Both Hegel and Freud view mental illness or more precisely psychosis as a deliberate withdrawal into the very realm of the unconscious and a gradual estrangement from the real and rational. Therefore, in Hegelian argument 'madness' becomes the 'double center' of reality as the mad self severed its ties with the rational self. Thus, the mad self becomes for Hegel, a double personality as is observed by William Wallace in *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind*. Nietzsche in his autobiographical account "Ecce Homo" (1900) talks about the dual experience of the sane and the insane and portrays them as a 'double personality' as he notes:

I know both, I am both...This dual series of experiences, this access to apparently separate worlds, is repeated in my nature in every respect: I am a Doppelganger, I have a 'second' in addition to the first. (234)

This schizophrenic attitude is mildly depicted in Joker too, however he does not delineate the distinct traits of schizophrenia. His acts of criminality has a purpose, he intends to justify himself and his psychotic actions. Michel Foucault in the preface to his *Madness and Civilisation* observes:

...the constitution of madness as mental illness, at the end of the eighteenth century, bears witness to a rupture in a dialogue, gives the separation as already enacted, and expels from the memory all those imperfect words, of no fixed syntax, spoken falteringly, in which the exchange between madness and reason, was carried out." (x)



In his article, “Madness, the Absence of Work” (1995), he equates madness or the unconscious with the ‘truth of the human laid bare’ and therefore the society feels there is an immediate need to discard ‘madness’. He states that in the absence of any pathological awareness in the future madness will transform into an “ageless memory of an evil that has been effaced as a form of illness but persists as misfortune”. To simplify the concerned notion, Foucault talks about the institutionalization of madness as it has enormous revelatory power and is immensely capable of creating terror. Through this Foucauldian analogy, madness becomes a tool of resistance for Joker. In the flashback, Joker’s economic depravity and failed American dreams and in the present his facial deformity and his depressive psychotic criminal state make him a severely marginalized person. Therefore, when he reclaims power, he takes the deformed and socially neglected people, the participants of the freak show at his amusement park under his wing. Bright psychedelic neon colors used for all these quintessentially marginalized ‘creatures’ reflect a sense of solidarity. Madness as an act of resistance against the crumbling socio-political state of the country is most vividly represented in Joker’s song:

When the world is full of care
And every headline screams despair,
When all is rape, starvation
And life is vile,
Then there’s a certain thing I do,
Which I shall pass along to you,
That’s always guaranteed to make me smile,
I go Looony! (23)

The latter part of the song, “You can trade your gloom,/ For a rubber room/ and injections twice a day,” is a suggestion for a psychedelic drug therapy in an asylum. Joker also mentions how he has consciously avoided doses of reality as it “gets in the way of the hallucinations”. This questions the truth of his psychosis as he remains partially aware of himself, his feelings, his conscious as well as unconscious selves. However, despite his victimhood or his psychotic condition, one simply cannot disregard his sudden criminal impulse. The shift from his hesitation to rob for the sake of his family to his hedonistic attempt to kill and probably even rape Barbara Gordon to prove a point, while being aware of his condition cannot be born purely out of a trauma or psychosis.

It becomes pertinent to note that Joker’s ‘madness’ cannot be examined only through his criminal actions, it is primarily his words, his utterances that make him ‘sick’, ‘abnormal’ and ‘insane’. Foucault rightly says in his 1995 discourse *Madness, the Absence of Work* that madness is actually a ‘language’ that has been ‘excluded’: people who pronounce words that go against the socio-political institutions, words that are meaningless or violent or pose any sort of threat to the ruling institutions are categorized as ‘mad’. It is probably on this trajectory that Nietzsche locates madness in the conscious and not in the unconscious. Joker’s ‘sanity’ is established multiple times as at one point he states:

I mean you’re not unintelligent! You must see the reality of the situation. Do you know how many times we’ve come close to World War Three over a flock of geese on a computer screen?



Do you know what caused the last war? An argument over how many telegraph poles Germany owed its war debt creditors! Telegraph poles! Ha ha ha ha ha! Its all a big joke! Everything anybody ever valued or struggled for...it's all a monstrous, demented gag! (23)

This is the point where he clearly breaks away from his illusory, insane, unconscious and attempts to connect to the real, the conscious. According to him, madness is something that is embedded within us and it takes one single bad event to awaken it. Therefore, he tries to awaken the uncivilized insane self of Inspector Gordon by first stripping him naked to mark the initiation of the uncivilized and then shows him the pictures of his injured naked daughter for finally unleashing the mad in him. Joker tries to do the same to his foil, however he adopts a more sober psychological manipulative tool as he engages in a dialogue with him:

I mean, what is it with you? What made you what you are? Girlfriend killed by the mob, maybe? Brother carved up by some muggers? Something like that I bet. Something like that. (25)

These lines simultaneously exhibit a sense of understanding and empathy, given they both lost their families to the corrupt American society. This connotation of mutualism is depicted from the very beginning through multiple attempts to indulge in dialogues with an intention to look at the protagonist and the antagonist as coordinates along the same latitude of existence. Batman's words at the beginning of the comic is imbued with an anticipation for the ultimate existence of either the conscious or the unconscious: "I've been thinking lately about you and me. About what's going to happen to us in the end. We're going to kill each other, aren't we?" (5) However, the comic ending with the two characters sharing a good laugh over a joke finally depicts a co-existence of the both. The narrative ends with the same purple psychedelic patterns which were at the very beginning, therefore portraying the perpetual insanity. This is further established in the final illustration showing Batman and Joker as the two sides of the same structure.

Moore's Joker does not throw razor-tipped playing cards or spray poisonous concoctions, rather he primarily uses psychological manipulation. He shoots Barbara Gordon only to drive her father insane and prove how it does not take much to lose one's conscious self. Joker, here, emerges as an ambiguous, complex, multi-layered villain whose 'madness' is a tool of protest and resistance. The ambiguity is depicted in his conscious use of logic as well as reminiscence, apathy as well as understanding. It is this contradiction and ambiguous nature, that makes it harder to label him 'psychotic', especially when his delirious state minus the criminality, makes more sense. It is probably the psychedelic drugs that make him face a superhero with advanced high-functioning technological tools, unafraid and armed with a deformed grin, sadistic humor and manipulative tactics.

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Index

- Fig 1: Fabok, Jason. Batman: Three Jokers' Easter Eggs (Part 1). The Fabok Newsletter, <https://jasonfabok.substack.com/p/batman-three-jokers-easter-eggs-part>
- Fig 2: Fabok, Jason. Batman: Three Jokers' Easter Eggs (Part 1). The Fabok Newsletter, <https://jasonfabok.substack.com/p/batman-three-jokers-easter-eggs-part>.
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