

Origins of *Batman's* Joker

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As with any series (movies, books, comics, periodicals, etc.) with a web of long, overarching narratives, it may be hard to pinpoint the exact details of major characters or plot points in any particular story. A protagonist's fictional account may take several years to develop and, along the way, the story may become so convoluted that it can be challenging to trace when something specific may have happened. Unsurprisingly, comic books present this sort of issue (pun intended). In the case of the Joker, one of Batman's most well-known antagonists, and one of the most recognized villains in the world of comic books, establishing an origin can be a tremendous undertaking.

Comic books came into fruition in the early part of the twentieth century and, in nearly a century, an insurmountable number of stories have been told with a variety of writers for any one character. Batman as a character was first introduced in issue 27 of *Detective Comics* in May, 1939. Earlier issues in this series introduced detective-type stories with a variety of characters making up each individual issue; however, when Batman was introduced in issue 27, the character struck a chord with readers, eventually leading to the release of issue 1 of *The Batman*, written by Bob Kane in the spring of 1940. While *Detective Comics* is known for introducing a list of important characters central to the Batman canon, it wasn't until issue 1 of *The Batman* that readers were acquainted with the Joker. "Once again a master criminal stalks the city streets—a criminal weaving a web of death about him—leaving stricken victims behind wearing a ghastly clown's grin—the sign of death from the Joker!" reads his introduction.¹ The character wears his iconic purple suit and wide, red grin characteristic of the villain. His trademark green hair and plaster-white face are very pronounced. Here we get details of the mastermind that have become synonymous with the Joker, including his penchant for easily avoiding the law and his cruel way of disposing of his victims; bringing "death to his victims with a smile."² Seemingly an overly intelligent, almost omnipotent being, the Joker becomes a character not to be underestimated. Although the psychology behind his actions is not fully established at this point, the character shows the initial signs of becoming a central force to be reckoned with. His introduction in this issue sets the tone to what the character would become in the future, what we still see to this day. Even though this story doesn't fully develop the "origin" of the character, it allows us to delve into the nature of a character, one who epitomizes the very nature of a psychopath. Issue 1 of *The Batman* marks the

¹ Bob Kane, *The Legend of the Batman—Who He is, and How he Came to Be*, No. 1, (New York: DC Comics, 1940), 3.

² Kane, *The Legend*, 4.

first official appearance of the Joker and, as such, is an essential introduction to one of the most formidable opponents in the world of comics.

The Killing Joke, written by Alan Moore in 1988, is sometimes hailed by many readers as the definitive “origin story” of the Joker because it finally attempted to establish his backstory, before he becomes a malevolent force to the Batman and his sidekick, while he still retained a level of humanity. This story is an updated retelling of Detective Comics 168, *The Man Behind the Red Hood*. In this issue, the Joker develops an alter ego, The Red Hood. The Joker commits a crime and, cornered by the Batman at the Monarch Playing Card Company, throws himself into a vat of chemical waste. He survives, but becomes horribly disfigured in the process. This is the first and earliest attempt at providing a background for the Joker, written in 1951. In Alan Moore’s retelling, the origin story goes one step further, giving readers flashbacks to the Joker’s life before he develops the Red Hood persona. In these events, the Joker is a failing stand-up comedian struggling to make ends meet for himself and his pregnant wife after quitting his job at a chemical factory. Desperate for money, he becomes ensnared in a plot with gang members to steal money from a playing card company. He attempts to quit when his wife suddenly dies, but is forced to continue when threatened with death. Cornered by Batman during the heist, he throws himself into the vat and becomes the Joker. Both versions of this story are similar; however, *The Killing Joke* provides more information to the character as a struggling human being, a side to the character we have not seen up until this point. We feel a sense of pity for the character, one who shows realistic intentions and emotions and guilt at the events that enable the creation of the Joker; “one bad day” that drove the character crazy. This story provides an actual identity to a figure that is typically seen as a grotesque mastermind and, thus, this story is essential in establishing an origin to the Joker. Although widely accepted, there is some debate by critics as to whether Moore’s work is canonical because it is merely one interpretation of the character; nevertheless, the Joker presented in this story retains many of the darker elements that the character is known for.

In “Irresistible Lure of the Joker,” Douglas Wolk, a critic and an author who writes about comic books for several publications, covers the several incarnations of the character, from his multiple appearances in film to several essential storylines in the world of comics. In this article, the author traces the origins of the Joker to a 1928 silent film called “The Man Who Laughs.”³ He credits this film and actor Conrad Veidt as the initial inspiration of the character created by artists Jerry Robinson and Bill Finger twelve years after the film was released. In a sense, this could be seen as the true origin of the character, an idea that provided a template and vision, essentially an

³ Doug Wolk, “The Irresistible Lure of the Joker”, *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 24, 2012, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/irresistible-lure-joker-353678>.

“origin.” The author delves into the psychology of the Joker, relaying that he “is just deranged...just wants to watch the world burn.”⁴ This paints the Joker for who he truly is, the side of the character we see in almost every issue where he is an antagonist, an evil entity, hell-bent on creating a world of agony without remorse. He points out that the Joker doesn’t truly have an origin story, suggesting that *The Killing Joke* “might be a false memory.”⁵ Wolk drives home the point that there are many incarnations of the character that might interfere with continuity, making it difficult to place a true identity to the character. Nevertheless, the author attempts to reveal potential origins and inspirations for the character.

In “Physiognomy and Freakery,” pop culture author Mario Rodriguez mentions the “disputed...nebulous origins” of the Joker, beginning with the comics.⁶ He accurately states that there is some “debate about who originally conceived of the Joker.”⁷ Bob Kane and writer Bill Finger, according to Rodriguez, insist they created the character, but Batman illustrator Jerry Robinson claims he created the character while looking at a deck of cards. Kane and Finger claim they were inspired by the character of Conrad Veidt in the “The Man Who Laughs.” More importantly, Rodriguez states that this 1928 film “was based on the 1869 Victor Hugo novel” of the same name. One could see this as the TRUE origin of the Joker, the book that inspired the film, that inspired the author (or the illustrators) to develop the Joker. In the book, the protagonist is sentenced to death and his torturers cut “a permanent smile on the boy’s face.” Conrad Veidt’s “lanky figure, his angular facial features perfectly suited the nightmare aesthetic of expressionist...thus the stage was set for [Veidt’s] portrayal...to define the physiognomy of the Joker.”⁸ These different mediums left stepping stones of inspiration for the Batman creators, but the truth of Joker’s history (or lack thereof) is simply hard to establish.

It is difficult to pinpoint the one true origin of the Joker, as there are many established ideas and versions of the same character. Origin stories simply go beyond the first appearance of the character. A character needs a backstory, a history that compels them to be visible or act a certain way and, as such, exhibit leading traits; however, a character’s reason for existing may not be established until several issues after they are introduced or may take several years to fully manifest. Even then, once these origin stories are established and widely accepted, they may be retconned and rebooted (as is the case with many comic book characters that may need “revitalizing.”) In some reader’s eyes, *The Killing Joke* is canonically accurate; to critics *The Man in the*

⁴ Wolk, 48.

⁵ Wolk, 48.

⁶ Mario Rodriguez, “Physiognomy and Freakery: The Joker on Film.” *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture (1900-Present)*, 2014, 13, 2.

⁷ Rodriguez.

⁸ Rodriguez.

Red Hood may be seen as the only origin; and yet to others, *Batman #1* may be the Joker's primary origin. In the end, it is ultimately up to the reader to select their own storylines and to enjoy the various incarnations of the character with relish.