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Psychiatry in the movies

Batman and psychiatry

Joseph Kane

‘If you think Arkham’s scary as a doctor, you should try it as a patient.’
Harley Quinn, *Detective Comics*, no. 83100

Since first appearing in *Detective Comics* in May 1939, Batman has become one of the most recognisable characters in 21st-century culture, spawning countless television series, video games, graphic novels and films. A frequently dark and psychological franchise, the Caped Crusader’s battle to save Gotham City from a multitude of colourful enemies often takes place against the sinister backdrop of Arkham Asylum for the Criminally Insane, run by the sadistic Dr Jeremiah Arkham.

In addition to some of Batman’s more infamous foes, the Joker, the Penguin and Two-Face, Arkham is home to a number of other characters displaying a variety of psychiatric presentations: Amygdala, who, after surgical removal of his namesake anatomical structure, exhibits Klüver–Bucy syndrome; and the Ventriloquist, a former gangster with dissociative identity disorder, to name but two. However, it is our hero’s travails against doctors that expose the franchise’s prevailing unfavourable attitude towards psychiatrists and asylums.

A relative newcomer to the Batman universe, Harley Quinn first appeared in 1992, her origins detailed in the graphic novel *Mad Love* (1994). Portrayed in different versions as an intern psychiatrist or psychoanalyst, Dr Harveen Quinzel volunteers to psychoanalyse Batman’s greatest foe, the Joker, following his admission to Arkham, but soon falls in love with her patient. Manufacturing his escape and assuming the moniker Harley Quinn, she becomes his lover and sidekick: ‘I found the Joker’s psyche disturbing, his dementia alarming, and his charm irresistible!’

Dr Jonathan Crane, the Scarecrow, is a corrupt ‘expert in fear’ who induces his victims’ greatest fears through the administration of psychoactive substances, using a hessian sack as a disguise and gas mask. The role is played to chilling effect by Cillian Murphy in both *Batman Begins* (2006) and *The Dark Knight* (2008).

Although traditionally a minor character in the Batman canon, Dr Hugo Strange is one of Batman’s oldest enemies, first appearing in 1940 (pre-dating Catwoman and the Joker by several months), and is expected to appear as a key character in *The Dark Knight Rises*, the last film in Christopher Nolan’s trilogy. A corrupt Machiavellian professor of psychiatry, Strange performs barbaric experiments on his in-patients, brainwashes Gotham’s citizens and blackmails his rich psychotherapy clients. In the *Prey* series of graphic novels (2000), Strange is recruited as a forensic psychiatrist to the Gotham City Police and through psychological profiling deduces Bruce Wayne as the Caped Crusader’s alter ego.

In addition to its damning portrayal of psychiatrists, the series also contains tacit references to the anti-psychiatry movement. Alan Grant, author of *Batman: The Last Arkham* (1992), derived the name of serial killer Victor Zsasz from that of Thomas Szasz and many of the Joker’s quips (‘In a world as psychotic as this. . . any other response would be crazy!’) are reminiscent of R. D. Laing’s famous quote, ‘Insanity is a sane response to an insane situation’.

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