

MORAL NIHILISM AS REFLECTED BY JOKER IN *THE DARK KNIGHT* MOVIE

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Abstract. This thesis concentrates on the movie, *The Dark Knight*, which focuses on Joker's character, as a moral nihilist. In this study, the purpose is to analyze the behavior of Joker in the movie as he believes in nothing and lives with immorality as shown in the story. The writer uses library research to obtain data from trusted books, e-books, journals, articles, online documents, and also reliable websites are used as supportive data. In the intrinsic aspects, the writer covers characters, settings, and conflicts while in the extrinsic aspect, the writer uses Friedrich Nietzsche and Donald Crosby's nihilism and moral nihilism theory which is practiced in the thesis to analyze the problem. The result of this thesis proves that Joker reaches the third state of nihilism as he believes nothing and also experiences amorality, moral subjectivism, and egoism as forms of moral nihilism.

Keywords: Nihilism, Moral Nihilism Theory, The Dark Knight

A. INTRODUCTION

Popular culture has been influencing people throughout the world. According to Ray B. Browne in *Popular Culture Theory and Methodology: A Basic Introduction*, popular culture is "all those elements of life which are not narrowly intellectual or creatively elitist, including the spoken and printed word, sounds, pictures, objects, and artifacts" (2006:21). As a product of popular culture, movie is an effective tool to attract people. Nowadays, there are several genres of movie that exist. One of them is thriller genre. Among thriller movie directors, Christopher Nolan is known as the one who is talented as thriller movie director. The writer chooses one of Christopher Nolan's movies, *The Dark Knight*, as the object of study. It depicts a story of Batman, one of the familiar superheroes from DC Comics, and his notorious enemy, Joker.

Joker will be analyzed as the representative of moral nihilist figure. Joker has a unique character and he is different from other villains in movies. While they committed crime based on personal revenge, economic fulfillment, Joker does it his own way. He does not obey rules, laws, or even morals. Based on those ideas, the writer includes Joker as a nihilist. Ivan Turgenev in *Father and Sons* defined nihilist as "a man who does not bow down before any authority, who does not take any principle on faith, whatever reverence that principle may be enshrined in" (1862, chapter V). Nihilism has several branches and one of them is moral nihilism. According to Donald Crosby on *The Specter of the Absurd: Sources and Criticisms of Modern Nihilism*, "moral nihilism denies the sense of moral obligation, the objectivity of moral principles, or the moral viewpoint" (1988:35). Moral nihilism denies all moral values and does not believe something whether it is right or wrong to someone. Therefore, the writer will elaborate Joker as character by using moral nihilism theory.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

I. NIHILISM THEORY

a. First state

Nietzsche in his book *The Will to Power* mentions that nihilism has to be reached first when individual has no meaning in his life. Nietzsche states the first stage “nihilism as a psychological state will have to be reached, first, when we have sought a "meaning" in all events that is not there: so the seeker eventually becomes discouraged” (1968: 12). As we can see, when someone realizes that he has no meaning of life anymore, the first stage is reached. Usually this state comes as a disappointment from society, God, or even himself.

b. Second state

Nietzsche, in *The Will to Power*, stated that a person in the first state has the meaning to understand about nothingness in his/her life. According to Nietzsche:

Nihilism as a psychological state is reached, secondly, when one has posited a totality, a systematization, indeed any organization in all events, and underneath all events, and a soul that longs to admire and revere has wallowed in the idea of some supreme form of domination and administration (1968: 12).

Second state of nihilism occurs when individual has assured about his meaningless purpose and he has no hesitation, as the continuity of what happened in the first state. Everything is meaningless. This individual will not question his purpose of his life again because there is no turning back knowing that there are no purposes left for him; there are no reasons to live anymore.

c. Third state

The last state of nihilism is stated clearly by Friedrich Nietzsche. After someone has reached the first and second state, there will be another one which is the final state of nihilism. Nietzsche states that:

Nihilism as psychological state has yet a third and last form. Given these two insights, that becoming has no goal and that underneath all becoming there is no grand unity in which the individual could immerse himself completely as in an element of supreme value, an escape remains: to pass sentence on this whole world of becoming as a deception and to invent a world beyond it, a true world (1968: 13).

From the statement above, the third or last state of nihilism is when individual is totally empty about everything but himself, and the only way to go through the current situation is to do nothing that related to the world's value and to deny all the values that are existed in everything. Basically, when individual is being a nihilist, he will deny all the value in the world, such as metaphysical, partial, and moral. The world he sees now is completely different than the world in his own mind. Someone has a version of true world according to

his mind which is different with the reality. All his beliefs and faith will become null and he will deny that everything in the world does not exist, including the concept of world itself.

II. MORAL NIHILISM THEORY

a. Amoralism

Amoralism is the denial of every moral values and the purpose to live with immorality (Crosby, 1988:11). Crosby takes an example from Wolf Larson, a novel character of *The Sea Wolf* by Jack London. In the novel, Larson says “it is like yeast, a ferment, a thing that moves and may move for a minute, an hour, a year, or a hundred years, but that in the end will cease to move (1981:35)”. This became Crosby’s idea of amoralism because the idea is to assure that life is actually meaningless. Another idea comes up when Larson said “where there is room for one life, she sows a thousand lives, and its life eats life till the strongest and most piggish life is left (1981:48)”. On the previous statement, Larson disagrees that someone has to show respect to other people’s lives yet that someone has no value of life at all. Someone is in a position where he belongs to nowhere; not helping someone in valuing his life and not striving for his own benefits because he has his own perspective about life that not everyone cannot understand entirely. He is just living his own life like nothing really matters.

b. Moral subjectivism

The theory of moral subjectivism is a view or perspective from individuals who have their own morals and for sure, it is different from everyone (Crosby, 1981:12). It cannot be considered right or wrong by anybody else because each individual has their own perspective. Morals standard are relative among everyone. Nothing to be argued about one’s view to another. There is no exact reason in maintaining a debate over something.

c. Egoism

Egoism is a view where an individual does things just for himself and nobody else (Crosby, 1981:14). In other words, the individual wants his own victory regardless whether what he does are true or false, right or wrong, etc. Egoism mainly disagrees anyone’s moral principles because he thinks his own perspective is right above any others. Anyone should follow someone’s supreme rules in any ways. This happened because someone sees everybody else equally but him. The egoist wants his power above everyone and it can prolong into the right of someone’s fate as prove that someone can really surpass other people power above any others.

C. METHODS OF THE STUDY

In this study, the writer uses library research to collect data and sources for the analysis. Library research obtains data through printed and new media such as books, e-books, journals, and website. Those trusted and related sources for the analysis guide the writer directly in completing his study. The writer uses one of the nihilism branches which is moral nihilism to analyze Joker’s philosophical approach in the movie *The Dark Knight* directed by Christopher Nolan. According to Friedrich Nietzsche on *The Will to Power*, nihilism is “every belief, every considering something-true is necessarily false because there is simply no true world” (1968:14).

D. ANALYSIS

I. INTRINSIC ASPECTS

I.I. CHARACTER

I.I.I. MAJOR CHARACTER

I.I.I.I. Bruce Wayne as Batman

Batman or Bruce Wayne plays as the hero in the movie. He earns his reputation as the dark knight of Gotham City. He shows up often in the story, conflicts rise up between him, and he is one of the main characters in the movie. However, Bruce only reveals himself in the morning as CEO of Wayne Enterprise and becomes Batman when the night comes without pulling his mask off. His two different sides make him as the major character that shows up in the movie almost all the time, and considering the movie entitled *The Dark Knight* which tells about Batman's story.

I.I.I.II. Joker

Another major character in *The Dark Knight* movie is Joker. Joker plays as the main villain in the movie. He is the nemesis of Batman and often brings conflicts into the story. He often wears a white, black, and red make up with long green wavy hair. His crimes are uncountable and he is the biggest villain in the movie. The only one who could keep up with him is Batman. Batman could anticipate Joker's movement in order to save people in Gotham City.

I.I.II. MINOR CHARACTER

There is only one minor character in *The Dark Knight* movie by Christopher Nolan. He is Alfred Pennyworth. As stated before by James L. Potter, minor character has a role in helping major character. Alfred is related either with Bruce Wayne or Batman's life in the movie. Alfred helps both Bruce Wayne and Batman to support, improve, and develop his role.

I.II. SETTING

I.I.I. SETTING OF PLACE

Joker and Brian Douglas, a fake Batman, are on the news mentioning Batman and Gotham continuously. It is indicated by the dialogue by Joker from 00:42:58 to 00:43:21.

JOKER : So you think Batman's made Gotham a better place? Hm? Look at me. Look, at me! You see, this is how crazy Batman's made Gotham. You want order, in Gotham, Batman must take off his mask and turn himself in.

Joker mentions Batman and Gotham in the monologue above which is referring to the current city where he and Batman live, in Gotham City. In addition, the news channel itself named as Gotham City News, making it clear that the news is being reported in the same city.

I.I.II. SETTING OF TIME

The movie takes its setting of time from around the year of 2007 – 2010, as indicated by the cameos of Nokia 6630 and Lamborghini Murcielago. It shows that the setting of Gotham City takes period at 2007 to 2010, taken from which the car is first produced, not the cellphone one.

I.II.III. SETTING OF SOCIAL BACKGROUND

There are three categories of social class in the movie, which are lower class, middle class, and upper class. In lower class, some laborers are working on the nightshift, unloading crates into the warehouse, having an unstable working hours, with minimum wage to live. Middle class represents in a district attorney and a security. They are working under someone's authority, getting their retirement salary for the rest of their life, and receiving enough wage to live on their own. Meanwhile, the upper class in the movie has a CEO and a mayor which are showing the power of upper class ruling above lower or middle social classes.

I.III. CONFLICT

I.III.I. INTERNAL CONFLICT

Bruce Wayne is having a dilemma whether he is about to surrender by revealing himself as Batman in front of the public or not. He seriously thinks that all people who have died of Joker is also died of Batman. Bruce wants to turn himself in, which he has never done before. His identity will be exposed to the public and his life as Batman and Bruce Wayne will be done.

I.III.II. EXTERNAL CONFLICT

In the movie, Bruce Wayne changed into Batman when Joker and his clown gangs comes into a party looking for Harvey Dent location. Then, Batman fights with Joker and his clown gangs saving Harvey's current location, Rachel, and people safety in the party. Batman fights both in duel or group fights.

BATMAN : This city just showed you that it's full of people ready to believe in good.

JOKER : Until their spirits broke completely. Until they get a good look at the real Harvey Dent and all the heroic things he's done. You didn't think I'd risk losing battle for Gotham's soul in a fistfight with you? No. You need an ace in the hole. Mine's Harvey.

BATMAN : What did you do?

JOKER : I took Gotham's white knight and I brought him down to our level. It wasn't hard. See, madness, as you know, is like gravity. All it takes is a little push.

When Batman is giving his argument towards Joker, out of nowhere Joker counter attacks his opinion by giving a statement as well, as shown on dialogue. Their arguments are battling each other, showing whose statement is better. In the end, Joker wins his argument against Batman and this is displaying that Batman and Joker is not only having a duel fight but also an argument fight. (02:14:14 to 02:15:09).

II. EXTRINSIC ASPECTS

II.I. NIHILISM ANALYSIS

There is a conversation between Bruce and Alfred questioning what kind of man Joker is. Alfred answers his question in a long description of a man refused to obey order by bribing him with precious stone. The way Alfred describes the man in the story is indicating that the man is a nihilist, judging from the behavior. In the fourth line of the dialogue, Alfred says “because some men aren’t looking anything logical, like money. They can’t be bought, bullied, reasoned or negotiated with. Some men just wanna watch the world burn”. The first sentence of his line saying that some men, in general, are not looking for money, yet they have their own purpose. No matter how big the amount is, they are still going to refuse it. The next sentence is showing the dominance of men who are looking those unusual things. The indication is on the last sentence of Alfred’s dialogue to Bruce. Alfred does not even know anything about Joker, but he could describes his character in which Joker seeks the world collapsing itself. Joker does not look for anything in particular about the world. As the line says, Joker is also indicating as a man who cannot be negotiate with in any way. He does not looking for anything for himself and does not care about it. Joker succeeded to surpass the three states of nihilism that has been mentioned before by Nietzsche in *The Will to Power*, and proving that Joker is an example of nihilist. (00:54:00 to 00:55:10).

II.II. MORAL NIHILISM ANALYSIS

II.II.I. Joker’s Amoralism

Joker manages to rob a bank along with his gangs, which eventually died one by one killing each other. The gangs do not know that one of them is Joker, because they are all wearing clown masks. The job given to them is different, including killing a clown who has been done doing the task. So, the last clown does not know what really happen to other clowns. The idea is arranged by Joker only, without being interrupted by any members. He plans it all alone. By this means, his amoralism is indicated from all those actions. Joker plans it all by himself, robs a bank, lets his gangs kill each other, and kills the last clown. Those actions can be categorized as amoralism, as defined from the theory that he sees someone life as zero value, no intentions of helping anyway. Yet, he focuses on his job without considering the others even his own gangs. He got the full money without paying all his gangs and escaped undetectable using school bus so the police will find only dead bodies and empty safe. Joker does not really care for what happens in the bank (00:01:10 to 00:06:23).

II.II.II. Joker’s Moral Subjectivism

In the story, Joker is also showing an indication of moral subjectivism characteristic as mentioned in the theory, which is, nothing can be said as right or wrong about something as everyone is having their own view and nothing can be debate over it. Someone can express his view without looking someone else’s view.

JOKER : Hm? You know what I noticed? Nobody panics when things go “according to plan”. Even if the plan is horrifying. If tomorrow I tell the press that, like, a gangbanger will get shot or a truckload of soldiers will be blowing up nobody panics. Because it’s all part of the plan. But when I say that one little old mayor will die well, then, everyone loses their minds. Introduce a little anarchy, upset the established orders and everything becomes chaos. I’m an agent of chaos. Oh, and you know the thing about chaos? It’s fair.

As shown in the conversation between Harvey Dent and Joker, Joker tries to tell him that he is not the one who did previous accident to Harvey and Rachel, instead, Joker blames Gordon and his men. Although Joker did that but Harvey does not know the details, so he just believe all what Joker is saying. During their conversation, Joker is saying about how he sees the world and telling it to Harvey one by one. He shares his thoughts to Harvey as shown in medium-close up of two pictures below. He has no intention in subduing Harvey because he is just describing what he has in mind. In his mind, the world is somewhat unfair when people are following plan without thinking it first. So, Joker chooses the way chaos works. He thinks it is reasonable to get in the world he lives in.

II.II.III Joker’s Egoism

Not long after that scene, another Joker plan is on the way. He manages to call Gotham City News presenter during on air, telling that he is about to do something next.

NEWS PRESENTER : Who is this?

JOKER : I had a vision of a world without Batman. the mob ground up a little profit and the police tried to shut them down one block at a time. And it was so boring. I’ve had a change of heart. I don’t want Mr. Reese spoiling everything but why should I have all the fun? Let’s give someone else’s a chance. If Coleman Reese, isn’t dead, in sixty minutes, then I’ll blow up a hospital.

On the news, Joker is saying about how he wants to show the city a whole new crime instead of playing hide and seek like the mob and police do, plus how he wants to test people’s way of thinking. All his fun must have been done by killing specific person, Coleman Reese, in a short time without laying his hands. He wants other people to do it. People should follow his order to avoid death of their family in the hospital. This plan is driving the entire city crazy. Only to satisfy Joker’s personal need, people, who are basically stranger, should follow what order is given by him whether they like it or not. These options will both requires someone’s life, as inferred from the definition of egoism. People have no choice except following orders by Joker.

E. CONCLUSION

Joker’s amorality in the movie is reflected by killing people, killing his own members, robbing mob’s money, hijacking trucks, blowing up a hospital, and all those indications are showing amorality examples as a moral nihilist. His moral subjectivism comes when he

shares his idea about chaos to Harvey Dent without both of them arguing, even people in normal would say chaos is wrong, but Joker is not. The egoism of his character is also dominant in the story, where he does things in a continuity, such as terrorizing people in the city, wanting Coleman Reese to dead, attempting to explode two ferry ships, all these are showing his power over people to satisfy his own needs. His behavior of being zero sympathy, having his extreme perspective, and breaking morals reflect it all. Joker proves the indication as a nihilist and experiences amorality, moral subjectivism, and egoism as the forms of moral nihilism.

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