

The Symbolic Psychology of Batman Villains

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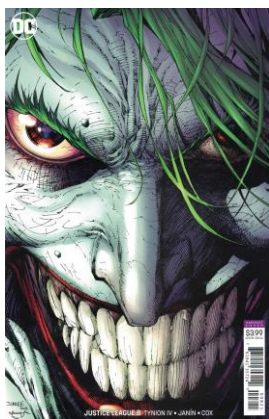


The Batman comics have always been famous for its villains almost more than the hero himself. Instead of being based on superpowers, these criminals are based on their own kind of gimmicks, some sort of symbolic costume and *modus operandi* that makes them more realistic than superpower villains, yet more meaningful than the Dick Tracy gangsters from the 1930's they sometimes resemble.

Much has been said about the psychology of Bruce Wayne and his alter ego, Batman, as well as the psychology of The Joker, his arch nemesis. I'm not attempting a clinical psychological profile (and no, Two-Face does not have "multiple personality"). My goal is to take the most iconic Batman villains and highlight the psychological components behind them. While they may have been invented as gimmicky gang villains in a previous era, over time they have evolved to become symbolic of Bruce Wayne's own psyche, the psyche of the fans who read the comics, and even the social psyche of the fictional city of Gotham itself, which has

always been its own character, a place that has always known crime, a place that gave birth to the Batman.

Each of these villains is a kind of mirror to Wayne himself, or a shadow in his psyche that he must confront as if in a dream. On the surface he is a gimmick battling gimmicks, a persona battling personas. But Gotham itself is an evolving dreamscape, sometimes screwball, sometimes gothic, sometimes realistic, sometimes surrealistic, but always afflicted. To ask what makes Gotham corrupt is to ask what makes the human psyche haunted. This is the psyche of the city that gave birth to its most iconic villains, and the hero haunted by the task of haunting them.



JOKER — THE SOCIOPATH CLOWN. He is the ultimate foil to Batman; the opposite of him in every way. Smile v Frown. Colors v. Dark. Whimsical v. Serious. Batman has one absolute origin; the Joker's origin is largely unknown. Batman is a force with the single purpose of justice; the Joker is a force of pure chaos. Batman seems enslaved by his will for justice; the Joker seems free to do as he pleases. While Batman serves the law and Joker has no rules whatsoever, they are both outside the law. While most would diagnose the Joker as a psychopath, some would argue he is super-sane, having evolved an ability to be what he is and survive a socially chaotic urban environment. The Joker fears nothing except, ironically, the death of his nemesis the Batman. Clowns are society's safety outlet for foolish tendencies; that place in our subconscious where ecstasy and dread mingle in paradox.

The Joker's graffiti of Gotham is a contradiction of bright carnival-esque colors and the fear of doom. Scores of Gothamites laughing to death underscores our fear of "too much haha, pretty soon boohoo." We want the fun but run

from the panic of carnival surprises. By superimposing his face on his victims, Joker can create a Gotham Batman fears most: A city that does not fear him, but laughs at him.



PENGUIN — THE GENTLEMAN OUTCAST. Batman's zoological opposite: Flightless bird vs flying mammal. Bruce Wayne is a rich man in a freak suit; Cobblepot is a freak in a rich man suit. Penguin represents the deformity of corruption at the highest level, often operating a nightclub and fraternizing with politicians and kingpins. Bullied and rejected, he seeks to prove himself to society, like Bruce, whose childhood trauma pushes him to prove both his family's legacy and honor it by perpetual restitution. He's a political cartoon. His umbrella symbolizes his retreat into the comfort of luxury, like any plutocrat, like the playboy "mask" Bruce Wayne wears daily to cover his (perhaps) true identity: The Batman. Cobblepot has a Napoleon Complex, compensating for his stunted, grotesque form through abuse of power and eccentric collecting of rarities. Neurotic and delusional, yes. But insane? No, unless you count moral insanity. Penguin is still probably sane, but could bribe his way into Arkham Asylum if need be. He is the ugly version of ourselves in our conscience.

"Penguin for Mayor" flyers all over Gotham, or just the fact that his deformed body fits into what is very normal attire for a Gotham elite, reminds us that sometimes corruption and crime isn't just a super villain's role—it's an entire city's. Just like Bruce, Penguin is often an orphan type, a ruthless child of Gotham created by a ruthless city. Penguin haunts Batman as a sign that Gotham tolerates crime and as a warning of what Bruce Wayne's aristocracy could cause him to become..



RIDDLER — THE MYSTERY; THE SPHINX. A man of superior intellect, who could easily get away with his crimes, but can't help but want Batman to know it was him. He's an obsessive compulsive narcissist. He has to outclass Batman as detective. Just as Batman seeks to solve crimes, Riddler seeks to leave his crimes unsolved, and yet he cannot help but leave clues for Batman to solve them because he wants to be recognized. His cryptic compulsion subverts his desire to tell the world what he has done. If he can't be caught, he can't be pursued, and if he can't be pursued, he can't be acknowledged. Batman's quest for justice is frustrated by a man who can get away with crime, and who is only caught because of his own weakness, not Batman's crime-solving skills. His outfit and cane are contrasts, a limp gameshow host: Riddler holds the power over his prestige, yet his riddles are a crutch tracing back to him. He is that part of our conscience that desires to gloat of our misdeeds, our own "tell" that subverts our hubris.

Question marks covering the city are a reminder of unsolved crimes, just like the unsolved murder of Bruce's parents. And if crime will never permanently be solved, we are left with the terrifying question: Do we need Batman?



SCARECROW — THE FRIGHT. The protector turned on its maker. Batman's operative mirror, this manipulator uses fear to prey on the weak, just as the Batman uses fear to prey on the fearful. He is a sadist, exercising control over others by inflicting pain and terror upon their minds. Batman seeks to control crime by inflicting pain and terror upon those who wield such a weapon. Crane represents thwarted justice, a mannequin meant to fend off pests instead turns on people. He represents that fright in our minds we both avoid and seek out. His addiction to fear urges him to seek out Batman, a kindred spirit. He is that phantom that preys on our subconscious nightmares.

Gotham is a city of frightened people cowering, and yet Scarecrow's toxin creates a surreal manifestation of what has always haunted the city. Scarecrow turns Gotham into the asylum, reminding everyone that lives there that sanity and control (the control that Batman fights for) is nothing but an illusion. Scarecrow represents the fear that Batman himself attempts to use as a means of control.



CATWOMAN —THE ANIMA SHADOW. She is Batman's likeness in female form, as bat rhymes with cat, and both are common Halloween or witch-themed tropes as small black mammals. Some might diagnose her as a kleptomaniac, but she doesn't steal compulsively. Her lifestyle is one of self-empowerment. In fact, it may be a sexist institution that commits her instead of imprisons her (since females are "weak-minded"). As Batman's dark **anima** (*Jung's term for the feminine part of a man's psyche / the part of the psyche that is directed inward, and is in touch with the subconscious*), she is a potentially desirable mate for his crime-fighting persona, as well as a foil. Like Batman, Catwoman is an outside-the-law, morally gray, costume-wearing loner. She is compatible to his shadow, but not his self. Their flirtation is not only romantic, but also represents his flirtation with evil, both in how he constantly pursues it and how he must subvert the law to defeat it. As Selena Kyle, she is also something of a foil to Bruce Wayne, a social climber aspiring to acquire the opulence Bruce was born in to. She is his grey, morally ambiguous side, and a potential pairing, as they are both loners who sometimes share common goals. She is the naughty subconscious shadow we flirt with.

If Catwoman wants to change anything in the city, it's to help the poor and marginalized. Otherwise, she is nothing more than a small-time and self-absorbed villain, rather than a Robin Hood. Still, her discreet thievery exists in the shadows of a city of noir. The dark corners of Gotham itself are homes to pests that lurk to do mischief, constant reminders that dark deeds go on unseen in the city's alleys, and to fight them, Batman has to dwell there as much as Catwoman does.



TWO-FACE — THE DUAL SOUL. The man with a ruptured psyche. Criminal lawyer turned criminal against the law. Is your fate good or evil? Flip a coin to decide. A district attorney literally scarred by the mob, Harvey Dent is justice perverted. He is the corrupt face. His law-seeking side and his lawbreaking side physically manifest as a symbol of how eventually even the purest on the quest for justice could succumb to evil. No, he is not bipolar. He may have dissociative identity disorder, lapsing into a state in which his self is distant in order to commit his deeds, using the mechanism of a coin to distance his conscience from his will. Batman's cowl operates in much the same way as Harvey's coin, becoming a mechanism to

hide his identity not only from the public, but from himself. Batman is a lawbreaker vigilante, and Bruce's dark, illegal, monstrous side. Just like Harvey Dent, Batman is a hero who could (if he hasn't already) become corrupted by his own passion for vengeance. He represents the divide in our subconscious we draw between what we cannot reconcile.

Do we have free will? Harvey Dent's face covering Gotham reflect on the corruption of justice and its tipped scales, as well as the loss of hope in a hero tragically tainted. The city itself has a split psyche, a malevolent criminal element and a self-righteous element.



MR. FREEZE — THE WINTRY SOUL. The unsympathetic, isolated (“ice-soul-ated”) scientist. Suffering from depression over the loss of his beloved wife, Dr. Freeze turns to anti-social behavior. It is ironic that a man who seems to love his dying wife so much would show no love for humanity in his efforts to save her and avenge her. Like Bruce Wayne, he must become cold-hearted and wear armor that separates him from his humanity in order pursue a quest to restore peace and revive some semblance of happiness. But both have gone so far that neither Bruce nor Victor will have peace again. Unlike Batman, however, Freeze is indifferent to everyone, criminal and innocent alike. He displays the traits of a schizoid, although he shows empathy for his (mostly likely dead) wife. Perhaps he is just a man who made selfish decisions, and who is also on the autistic spectrum. Maybe not insane, perhaps he is committed to Arkham, the specialized institution able to secure him safely, because of his physical disability. He is the specter of

stagnation and the depression that lurks in our subconscious, freezing us, paralyzing us and disconnecting us from humanity.

A city covered in perpetual ice. In Freeze's world, Gotham itself is in stasis. There is no progress. It resembles his soul, his body, his wife's health, and his relationships. “Always winter, but never Christmas.” Helpless. Inert. Like in the Arthurian legend, a land needing a cure, just like Nora Fries, just like Bruce Wayne's soul.



POISON IVY — THE EXOTIC MYSTIQUE. The seductive eco-terrorist, she can kill with a kiss. She seeks empathy not in humans, but in plants, which provide her all she needs. Perhaps she is psychopathic, able to charm anyone susceptible of her pheromones, whether or not she herself is interested in them. Her power over Batman is that she can charm him into the illusion that his emptiness can be satisfied sexually by her exotic nature, a woman as freakish as he is, yet vital and strong. Like plants, she has no empathy, but only seeks to promote herself. She is the proverbial thorn in Batman's side. She is the alluring, dangerous form that tantalizes our subconscious. Poison Ivy represents the perversion of the natural world in the same way that Bruce Wayne perverts the bat, a creature of the natural world, and his own nature, for purpose of revenge.

Ivy creeping on Gothic architecture, a false paradise. Her plague is the promise that the city can be revived by something unnatural. Like crime itself, her toxic ways look beautiful, but are harmful, and the city presents an enticing veneer that only chokes the weak.



THE CROC —THE HUNGRY ID. The inhumane dragon, “Killer Croc” is a tortured cannibal. Few even know his human name, Waylon Jones. Like and unlike Batman, he is a man in a beast’s skin, yet he was born with it. Croc is mistaken for a beast by society, and he has allowed himself to become the beast that others see him as. Like Bruce in his Bat suit, Croc forsakes his humanity. He is an atavistic demon-figure. He represents Batman at his most feral. Perhaps committed to Arkham because of his disfigurement and strength, he also displays antisocial traits beyond mere misanthropy. He identifies with nothing but himself. He is the dragon of instinctual, unsatisfied appetite that lurks in our subterranean subconscious.

Unlike Penguin who can rise to the top of Gotham, Croc is doomed to the sewers. He represents the cannibalism of crime in the dens of Gotham, the devouring dragon that is evil, the seedy underbelly implying that the city’s own hidden foundation is corrupt. Ruling an underworld of one, he is that monstrous force that lurks in Bruce Wayne’s heart.



BANE — THE WRESTLER. The warrior luchador. Born into a prison, his mind has been molded by crime and punishment. Thus, he is both warped and disciplined. His venom addiction is a contradiction, as it is both his strength and his weakness. He is not insane, only intensely rational. His intellect is equal to Batman’s, and his strength is greater. But without access to Venom, he is weaker than Batman. This addiction tortures him mentally as well as physically, as his superiority is not self-made, but artificial. He “cheats” and must therefore punish himself. But his addiction to venom warrants commitment to an asylum for treatment. Like Batman, Bane is a psyche in bondage, both to the prison mindset and to the addicting Venom. His BDSM-like gear resembles Batman, as both men seek some form of pleasure, or release, from punishing others, and perhaps punishing themselves (arguably, Wayne is punishing himself for letting his parents die). Bane is the punitive spirit that tortures our subconscious, making us both strong and weak. He wrestles with his addiction as well as his struggle for freedom and discipline.

Gotham, like Pena Duro prison, is a place where fear rules and the strong survive. To Bane, Gotham is only a larger prison, a den of crime punishing crime, justifying his behavior. Bane’s addiction mirrors both the addiction of drug abuse and the addiction of the evil to the benefits of crime.

BLACK MASK — THE FALSE FACE. The self-absorbed tyrant. Other villains are either good men scarred by evil or evil men hiding under a guise of benevolence. He despised his parents, who raised him to hide hypocrisy and corruption. Rather than fight evil, he is unashamed of it. Roman Sionis was raised corrupt, and his transformation only exposes his corruption to the world, and only magnified his evil. Like Batman, Roman’s mask is a terrifying one covering a handsome angelic face which itself only covers shadow. Batman is a horror hiding Bruce Wayne, who himself is only hiding grief and fear. Both men wear a mask attached to their parents’ deaths. Masks upon masks,

obscuring who a person really is, or burying what a person could be. Black Mask represents the layers of subconscious that mask both our darkness and our light, both disguising and confessing our true selves. Rather than hating evil like Bruce, Roman chooses to hate the semblance of good, and embrace evil, as it empowers him.

Black Mask is a privileged crime lord. His openly horrifying face represents indecency exposed. He is neither a fallen angel nor a demon in disguise. He is what he is. His Gotham is the brazenly unashamed corruption, the prideful, hateful, scarred face hovering over the city, depravity laid bare like an open coffin. His realm is one in which evil does not hide, but continually intimidates the good.



HARLEQUIN — THE LETHAL SERVANT. More than the female alternative to Joker. She is a daughter figure to Batman as well as a sexual fixation. Her abusive relationship to her master, the Joker, has scarred her as much as it thrills her. She demonstrates traits of Hybristophilia, experiencing arousal from her crimes, as well as the criminality of her partner, Joker. Whether or not Bruce himself experiences arousal from subverting the law to punish criminals, he is attached to Harley as she is a damaged female whom he feels the need to punish. Even more so, she is a “product” of the Joker, a villain Batman can never seem to stop, and he therefore feels guilt for her deeds. She is a twisted legacy that Batman cannot shake. She even desires to be caught and punished by him. She may have Autassassinophilia and Biastophilia. Just as Joker is a union of ecstasy and terror, Harley is that shameful sprite of arousal and guilt. She is a fanatic, insecure in herself, and thus pursuing the one man who uses and abuses her, yet will never accept a full union with her.

Harley worships the Joker. She represents those who send fan mail to criminals. She is married to the Joker, essentially. Her city is one that is not afraid of crime, ashamed of it, or even acquiescent towards it, but aroused by it. Hers is a twisted place, a place full of fanatics in costumes. In a way, she is us, the fans of Gotham literature.



MAD HATTER — THE ETERNAL CHILD. The man stuck at tea-time. He is obsessed with Batman's cowl as any child would be. His fixation on rhymes, children's literature, clocks and headgear are all defense mechanisms for his deflated self-image. Likely suffering from hypogonadism or some other failure to mature, his mind is in the permanent state of a child, and so he seeks to influence both children and adults in a vulnerable state in order to gain power over their mind to compensate for his powerlessness. Batman's own childhood trauma represents a failure to grow up, as he still dresses in a costume. Both are grown men doing childish things. Bruce channels his fantasies into a pursuit of justice while Jervis Tetch channels his into a pursuit of power and manipulation. His is the subtle, hypnotic influence of delusion on the vulnerable subconscious where decapitation represents emasculation, and a hat is a form of control. He may also be a pedophile, which was an accusation attributed to Batman in his relationship with the kid sidekick Robin during 1950's .

Mad Hatter's Wonderland superimposed over Gotham demonstrates the irrationality that has taken over the city, as well as the regression of its helpless citizens into a world without escape, a world where crime and punishment have no correlation, and the nonsense of tyranny rules.

HUSH — THE SPITEFUL MIRROR. The deceitful surgeon. Thomas Eliot himself resembles Bruce Wayne more than any other villain: sharing an upbringing as spoiled elites, masking his identity, and training to be a perfect opponent. Eliot “hushes” other people by having a mastery over not only their face, but their life. He is desperate to siphon the lives of others in order to retain his sense of self. Like in the nursery rhyme “Hush, Little Baby,” Eliot seeks plot after plot to maintain his sanity and keep his secrets safe. Like Batman, he must protect both his identity and his legacy. He is the nihilistic, blank mirror in our subconscious, the fear that we will be wiped out, even replaced.

Gotham is a place where many would crave a new identity, a new start. As a surgeon, Eliot can remake someone’s life. As a villain, he can take a life away. His Gotham is one in which nobody and anybody can be transformed into something else, or wiped from history.



CLAYFACE — THE SHAPESHIFTER. Originally a vain actor obsessed with his image, Basil Karlo desired to magnify himself. We are all searching for the role of a lifetime, and willing to mold ourselves into something else, even if it is unstable. Like Bruce Wayne, he is both shaped by tragedy and seeks to shape himself into something terrifying. He represents the instability of all the morphing forms that inhabit our subconscious, and the monstrous power they have to cast fear and doubt in our minds.

Clayface can take on the face of any citizen of Gotham. Crime can be anyone, and anyone can be criminal. He represents the disgusting nature of the vanity underneath Gotham, and the confusion and deception of paranoia that street wide crime brings about. Like Batman, Clayface changes his appearance as a means to an end.

VICTOR ZSASZ — THE BUTCHER. The impulsive serial killer. He stands out from other villains in how realistic he is, a ritualistic killer without unnecessary theatrics. From depression to gambling to murder, Zsasz became a soul addicted to gruesome killing. Like Batman, he has accumulated a tally of violence, and even has a reputation for it. Just as Batman’s violence on criminals liberates the innocent, Zsasz feels liberated by his murders, and feels he has liberated others of their lives. In our subconscious he is that violent impulse which tempts us all to murder. Zsasz sees a world bathed in red. In Gotham, everyone is already potentially marked for dead, and could be killed seemingly at random. It is a world of murder, a slaughterhouse.



ANARKY— THE REVOLUTIONARY. A symbol of youthful rebellion and an activist turned radical, Anarchy is a mirror to Robin the Boy Wonder, and to Batman as a possible candidate for mentoring on a lost path. Like Batman, Anarchy seeks justice by shaking up the *status quo* and is a lawbreaker in the name of good. He hates corruption as much as Batman, and considers himself a vigilante, but with much more overtly political overtones than Batman. His golden mask is both a mockery of the wealth-corrupted establishment and the purity of his youthful ideals. What separates him from Batman is that Batman reinforces the status quo, sending bad guys to the same institutions, whereas Anarchy wishes to end those institutions and establish something new. He is the energetic spirit of upheaval in the subconscious, that cognitive dissonance that sparks a revolution of the mind

and heart. He is what could be if Robin were Batman instead of Bruce.

Anarchy in the streets. His vision of Gotham is one turned completely upside down, where corruption is solved by demolishing the most corrupt institutions. The world set to rights.

HUGO STRANGE — THE THREATENING HEALER. The chief psychiatrist who siphons his patients' sanity. He is the first to discover Batman's identity. He even obsesses over Batman, a perfect psychological specimen, someone clearly insane yet able to functionally operate as both Bruce Wayne and Batman. He wants to pin the Batman up on a wall, so to speak. He falsely diagnoses Batman in order to psychologically defeat him and "become" him. He admires and loathes Batman for being insane yet super-sane. He is the gazing eye that we feel studies our subconscious from outside it, playing into both our fear of and desire to be dissected, studied, understood, and even cured.

Gotham is a city whose ills must be diagnosed and cured. Who is up to such a task? It is a city seeking to understand itself, treat itself. But whoever has the power to do that is one to fear.



RHAS AL GHUL — THE DEMON; THE TYRANT FATHER. "Demon's head"

Rhas Al Ghul has (possibly) seen the world turn to chaos and again to order more times than any of us. Like Batman, he has radicalized in the wake of witnessing overwhelming tragedy. He demands a world in perfect balance. Like Batman having fallen into the Bat Cave as a child, the mercenary lord returns again and again to a pit of his own to be reborn. He is the specter of judgement in our subconscious, the demon of death and failure. Like an overbearing father, he governs the "league of shadows" that dwell in our subconscious mind, striking us with the fear of disappointment that urges us to be worthy.

Rhas al Ghul would simply have Gotham destroyed, a smoldering ruin representing the end of a line, the death of a legacy, a world washed clean of its sin once and for all. Al Ghul represents what Wayne could become, and Gotham represents what he fears the world could become if justice is not rendered.

More could be said about a few others, who are less gimmicky, more mercenary, or just plain silly: Deathstroke (assassin, symbol of the dead conscience), Deadshot (marksman, symbol of the guilty conscience and the death wish), Firefly (the pyromaniac, symbol of impulse control), Calendar (the father of seasons, symbol of persistent memory), Ventriloquist (the puppeteer, symbol of destructive coping mechanisms), Max Zeus (the self-made god, symbol of self-worship), Solomon Grundy (the undead, symbol of cursed resurrection).

Not only is Batman one of the most iconic superheroes, his villains are remembered for their symbolic gimmicks and deeds, as well as their relationship to the Bat. Underneath this relationship lies a very powerful world of symbols that work both as literature and as psychology (even if most of it is amateur psychology). They also represent a city defined by crime. After all, they outnumber Batman significantly. This is why the Gotham pantheon of villains is so memorable, and a favorite of many fans of comics. Their role in comics speaks of our culture's own myths, as well as the psychology of crime and survival.