

## ABSTRACT

### Ambiguous Morality in the Human Condition as Reflected by Modern Villains from Popular Culture

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What makes morality and the question of right and wrong increasingly challenging to answer, and how does the recent trend of complex villains across various media reflect the state of morality? Through examining eight characters drawn from popular culture and analyzing their narratives and beliefs, their unique reflections of the human condition provide a basis for the human struggle between good and evil. Such a basis encompasses how individuals come to think about their actions and the actions of those around them in a way that expands the understanding of others. The narratives and beliefs of villains receive comparison with other, real-world examples across disciplines including, but not limited to, popular culture, philosophy, current events, and sociology. As each villain explored is expressly different, the implications and parallels derived from each are examined in ways that reflect their individuality. Analysis of each character's actions and ideologies illustrates morality as a uniquely individual construct.

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AMBIGUOUS MORALITY IN THE HUMAN CONDITION AS REFLECTED BY  
MODERN VILLAINS FROM POPULAR CULTURE

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Humans are innately evil. This claim may feel extreme, but it is the only explanation as to why evil exists. This is also not a new claim, as one of the most significant similar claims came from St. Augustine in *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, which tells his spiritual testimony and concludes that humans are so evil that only something as perfect and holy as Jesus could redeem humanity. Therefore, being innately evil means that evil decisions are the default choice, and humans are far more likely to stick with their default choices than to change, which only occurs in the presence of a better alternative. The effort to make the choice and shift from a poor choice to a good one is the roadblock that explains why people do not simply make the morally right choice.

I say that good choices are rational because, generally, in utilitarianism, as John Stuart Mill describes in his essay of the same name, an action being right only if the majority benefits from net happiness is the only truly rational way to construct a society (Mill). However, the fact that many decisions are not made to benefit the majority shows that not only are many people not rational, but that the absence of what is right means that humans are innately evil and that the absence of what is good implies that the only other alternative, evil, fills that space. It is an implication that impacts daily lives because humans must exert effort to make the right choice.

An example of this comes from Nobel-Prize-winning behavioral economist Richard Thaler, who pointed out in an opinion piece for the *New York Times* that more people are registered in Europe than in America to be organ donors because Europe uses

presumed consent while Americans need to opt-in to be an organ donor (Thaler). The utilitarian choice in this example is for people to benefit the majority by allowing their organs to benefit others if they do not need them. The difference in organ donor rates between Europe and America comes from the fact that the effort of changing the perceived status quo can be enough of an obstacle to override any willingness to do what is best for the majority. Of course, no one rule can encapsulate all human behavior, but it can outline the trends and ideas of the majority. Hence, for the sake of the argument, humans are evil.

With the existence of innate human evil established, a couple of questions need to be addressed. The first is whether that evil comes from within or if it is a learned habit from coexistence with other humans, like a virus. This argument is often referred to as “nature vs nurture.” Truman Capote encapsulates both sides of this argument in his book *In Cold Blood*, which chronicles the story of two men who murdered a family of four. One of the murderers, Richard Hickcock, is an example of an innately evil person, as he had no real reason (such as a horrific back story) to explain his choice to murder a family. His willingness to commit the crime is an example of innate human evil. The other murderer, Perry Smith, had a hard life that included his mother dying of alcoholism when he was 13, being abused in multiple orphanages by nuns and Salvation Army workers, and suffering a motorcycle accident that left him with chronic leg pain and a permanent handicapped (Capote). Although he played a lesser role in the murders than his partner, Smith was nevertheless complicit and made the evil choice, which his difficult life partially explains, although it does not excuse his actions. Regardless of how humans

come to be evil, it remains that we universally are, and all people act on such evil to varying degrees.

The next question is how humans personify evil in media and how the thinking of good and evil has evolved. In *I Wear the Black Hat*, Chuck Klosterman wrote about how humans think about evil and villains. His principal argument is that humanity's innate evil is unpredictable, rarely logical, and ultimately the driving force behind many decisions (Klosterman). The strongest support for this argument is in the chapter "Villains Who are Not Villains." He offers two lists: the first is a list of anonymous people who are "bad citizens and social pariahs," and the second is a list of charismatic people who can never be villains under the right circumstances (Klosterman 39). The lists are identical: "1) Men who hijack airplanes. 2) Con artists. 3) Funk narcissists. 4) Drug dealers. 5) Athletes who use race as means of taunting an opponent" (Klosterman 39). He spends the rest of the chapter walking down the list, giving two examples, one that would fit on each list under the same tag. The best example is comparing D.B. Cooper's legendary theft in 1971 when he hijacked an airplane for ransom and parachuted out to his presumed death with the 9/11 terrorists (Klosterman). Both hijacked airplanes, but Cooper did it suavely, calmly telling the flight attendant that he had a bomb and then parachuting out to an unknown fate. The 9/11 terrorists forcibly took control of a loaded plane and ran those planes into buildings to kill as many people as possible while also inciting mass panic.

All of this is to say that imagined villains are not the only ones compelling and interesting because real life features villains, some of whom are more compelling than others. Klosterman defines the worst villain as "the person who knows the most but cares the least" (Klosterman 14). This definition cuts through the appearance and demeanor of

people and characters and contextualizes everybody with a proper expectation of care based on the information with which they must work. This is an essential clarification because there have been media projects in recent years that present villains or untraditional heroes who may do the wrong thing for the right reasons or the right thing for the wrong reasons. This creates another dynamic within storytelling that adds tension to what is often the most interesting character: the villain.

Every story needs a villain. Without one, protagonists are flat and unchallenged characters living in an ideal world. In short, it is boring. In this way, villains create the conflict necessary for a successful and entertaining story. In recent years, the idea of what could constitute a villain has evolved. The general trend is that villains started as clearly wrong and extreme, akin to the evil that Nazis in Germany represented in World War II or what the Soviet Union represented in American media during the Cold War. Over time, villains and even heroes of different stories began to push the limits of what can be seen as morally right and wrong. Part of this was the creation of the anti-hero and subclasses of villains with complex motivations and actions. Collectively, it points to a moral gray area far more reflective of real life.

This thesis considers eight notable villains of recent years from films, television shows, and books and compares their stories and ideologies to a combination of philosophy, sociology, history, and current events. Because each villain is unique, their analysis will have unique approaches that fit the style of the villain's story and beliefs. I chose each character because each of the eight brings a different dimension to the conversation with their unique places and stances between good and evil. For example, Deadpool occupies an anti-hero niche where he functions as a true mercenary who does

good and bad things depending on who is paying him. It is impossible to compare Deadpool directly to the likes of Darth Vader, who deals with trauma and grief in a way that leaves him subject to manipulation from the Emperor. For this reason, I consider each villain unique and not part of an overarching trend of fictional villains. All the characters who have had a movie or TV show adaptation have garnered more attention in the last twenty-five years, breaking into mainstream media.

Given that humans are evil, we have become increasingly self-aware of our moral ambiguity and seek to justify evil actions or attempt to rally others to the cause of putting in the effort to make the utilitarian choice. We express this awareness by creating or identifying with the complicated reasons villains act on to understand the human condition and consciousness. Therefore, the goal is to examine the human condition and consciousness through the lense of these fictional villains to offer a conceptual perspective on what constitutes right and wrong and the current status quo of human morality.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Darth Vader

*“I find your lack of faith disturbing.”*

The story of Darth Vader holds a unique place in the minds of audiences because his looks and sounds are unbelievably iconic, and his presence in American cinema tells a story that spreads across several generations. His story is one of fear, pride, suffering, and, ultimately, the release of all three of those to redeem himself. Framing Vader’s story is also tricky because the original *Star Wars* trilogy came out in the 1970s and 1980s, while the prequel trilogy came out after, in the 1990s and 2000s. Vader also appeared in *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (2016) in the 2010s. This spans around forty years. From the story’s beginning, a pattern of fear, pride, and suffering emerges and devolves from a once-promising child making decisions to harm others in the hope of saving his wife from death. He unknowingly causes it and becomes the primary enforcer for an oppressive empire before redeeming himself right before dying. Ultimately, Darth Vader’s story speaks to the human condition and the difficulties of doing what is good in the face of what is evil.

Watching *Star Wars* linearly, the audience first meets Anakin Skywalker, who will eventually become Darth Vader, as a young boy in slavery with his mother. This takes place in *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* (1999), which establishes the build-up in the greater *Star Wars* galaxy to a massive intergalactic conflict, The Clone Wars, that will clear the way for the new Empire’s establishment. In this movie, Anakin is not the main character, but audiences know that the child will one day become Darth Vader. However, his presence in the movie is vital and a central plot point because he is the film’s subject.

Beyond helping the protagonists off Tatooine by winning a pod race, he also establishes a friendship with Padmé Amidala, his future wife and queen of Naboo. The main protagonists are Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi, and they pull Anakin out of slavery and take him to receive training to be a Jedi.

Meanwhile, Darth Vader's future master, Palpatine, gets elected as the Supreme Chancellor of the Republic, the existing coalition of planetary systems that governs the galaxy. At the end of the movie, the main antagonist, Darth Maul, and the two protagonists are locked in a duel while Anakin, flying a ship for the first time, happens to turn the tide of a significant space battle. Anakin's place in the space battle establishes his raw talent and that anything he decides to do will carry a monumental force behind it. In essence, Darth Maul and the two protagonists are fighting over the fate of Anakin Skywalker. Throughout the movie, Qui-Gon Jinn is a Jedi who is disgusted with hypocrisy, patient, and willing to trust people that the council is not, which is an antithesis to many of his peers. Darth Maul kills Qui-Gon Jinn, expelling the galaxy of the mentor most able to guide an already fearful Anakin. The movie ends, and Kenobi, following Qui-Gon's wishes, resolves to train Anakin as a Jedi.

The next movie, *Star Wars: Attack of the Clones* (2002), features Anakin Skywalker, Obi-Wan Kenobi, and Padmé Amidala as the central protagonists. The film opens with Anakin, now in his late teens or early twenties, and Obi-Wan talking about Anakin's feelings for Padmé, which there should be none that are romantic in any way because the Jedi swear off all romantic relationships due to fear of strong emotions and attachments. However, there are a few exceptions due to exceptional circumstances that make logistical sense, but the fact that Jedi leadership is willing to waive that rule in

some instances and not others speaks to their hypocrisy. At any rate, Obi-Wan and Anakin protect Padmé from assassins, leading them on separate quests, Obi-Wan to track the killer and Anakin to stay with and watch Padmé. This only deepens their emotional bond and sparks a romantic relationship. Then, Anakin knowingly disobeys his orders and finds his mother, whom he has not seen since he left slavery. He finds her barely alive at the hands of Tusken Raiders, indigenous Tatooine people, primarily pirates and raiders. His mother dies in his arms, and Anakin slaughters the entire village of Tusken Raiders, an action distinctly lacking any of the Jedi Order's values of peace, hope, and compassion. This is the first moment Anakin takes a step towards becoming Darth Vader and shows the danger of forming emotional attachments, much like he is developing with Padmé. From this point, Padmé and Anakin attempt to rescue Obi-Wan, who is in prison after the assassin he was tracking captures him. The killer also catches Padmé and Anakin, and the three protagonists appear in front of the film's antagonists, including the assassin and the leader of the Separatists, a coalition of planets that plans to wage war to exist outside of the Republic's influence. Little do the protagonists know that the Separatist Leader, Count Dooku, is acting under orders from Palpatine, who will effectively run two competing sects of the galaxy that will fight each other and clear the way for the Empire. Help arrives, and the three protagonists survive as a massive, planet-wide fight breaks out. The two most important things during the battle are that Anakin wants to abandon the fight when Padmé is thrown from a ship, but Obi-Wan reminds him that he has a mission to complete. The second is that, in a duel with Count Dooku, Anakin loses a hand as Dooku chops it off, requiring him to get a prosthetic. At the

movie's end, Anakin secretly marries Padmé, securing what will ultimately be his downfall to becoming Darth Vader.

The last movie of the prequel trilogy is *Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith* (2005), arguably the darkest *Star Wars* movie. It opens with Anakin, a fully grown Jedi warrior, staging an assault with Obi-Wan on a Separatist ship to rescue Chancellor Palpatine, where they again duel Count Dooku. This time, however, Anakin beats Count Dooku and chops off both his hands, leaving Dooku defenseless. At the prodding of Palpatine, Anakin executes Dooku, going against the Jedi way, which is to treat all prisoners with respect and not execute them in cold blood. Obi-Wan is also incapacitated during the fight, and Anakin carries him out of the spot despite Palpatine's urging to leave Obi-Wan behind. His decision signifies his attachment and loyalty to Obi-Wan, which will be pertinent to his downfall. After returning from the battle, Anakin finds Padmé, who informs him that she is pregnant with twins, jeopardizing their relationship's secrecy.

Simultaneously, the Jedi Order charges Obi-Wan with a mission to capture the last remaining leader of the Separatists, General Grievous. This appointment makes Anakin unbelievably jealous, making him more emotionally unstable than he already is. He also has dreams of Padmé dying. Desperate to find a solution and turning to Palpatine as Obi-Wan is away, Anakin partially confides in Palpatine, who informs him that there are secret methods of stopping death that the Jedi will not teach him. This knowledge leads him to speak more with Palpatine, who confides that he is a Sith Lord, a rival sect of the Jedi and their natural enemies that oppose everything the Jedi stand for, supporting power, hate, and rage. Anakin, very conflicted, turns in Palpatine to the Jedi Order, which dispatches several Jedi to arrest Palpatine. Anakin shows up and saves Palpatine, killing

the only surviving Jedi of the melee and pledging himself to Palpatine, believing that he is the only way he can save Padmé's life. Darth Vader is born, and he commits a horrible act: destroying the Jedi Order through murder, which includes killing his former friends and children training to be Jedi. At this point, Palpatine dispatches Anakin to a planet holding all the Separatist's remaining leaders, where he executes them. In the meantime, Obi-Wan and Yoda survive their executions and resolve to stop Palpatine and Anakin. Yoda goes after Palpatine and fails to stop him, narrowly escaping with his life. Obi-Wan and Padmé chase after Anakin and come face-to-face with him. Anakin is enraged that Padmé brought Obi-Wan to stop him, and he begins to choke her, incapacitating her. Anakin and Obi-Wan duel in explosive fashion- the fight only ends after Obi-Wan goads Anakin into making a dumb decision and cuts his appendages off. Anakin then is scarred beyond recognition, saved only by Palpatine, who puts him into a life support suit. Darth Vader retains Anakin's mind and much of his power. Obi-Wan brings Padmé to a secret location where she gives birth to twins Luke and Leia and then dies. A friend of Padmé's adopts Leia, and Obi-Wan takes Luke to Anakin's family on Tatooine, resolving to guard him and await a time when Luke can grow up and challenge Anakin and Palpatine.

The prequel trilogy revolves around Anakin's descent into Darth Vader. The first movie showcases his potential, dueling destinies, and Anakin's fear of the future. However, most viewers know what will happen and are watching his inevitable descent, creating a feeling of dread. The beginning of the descent is in the second movie, showing Anakin's emotional attachments, the danger that stems from such emotions, and the unhealthy pride he places in his power and how he wields it to its vast extreme with the Tusken Raiders. The third movie showcases the end of the descent and turning point

between good and evil, showing the still present pride and fear in Anakin but adding more suffering into the mix. Darth Vader's birth places him effectively at the whims of the now Emperor Palpatine, who ensures that he will suffer forever emotionally as he loses everyone close to him. Physically, Vader is also in pain because his famous black suit keeps him in constant agony (Batista). This may be by design because Palpatine respects Vader's power, thinking of Vader as unparalleled (Bacon). In essence, Darth Vader functions as an attack dog stuck on a leash for Palpatine. His purpose is best illustrated in his two brief *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* appearances. His first is choking the creator of the Death Star for failure, and the second is him marching down a dark hallway full of rebellion soldiers, red lightsaber out, absolutely slicing anything between him and his goal. At any rate, the prequels, although released after the original trilogy, built a platform on which to put the original trilogy. One of the more critical small details is that throughout the prequels, different characters refer to Anakin as "the chosen one." These references are vital to events in the original trilogy, where audiences were introduced to Darth Vader for the first time and where Darth Vader would bring balance to the galaxy.

In the original *Star Wars*, titled *Star Wars: A New Hope* (1977), Darth Vader plays a massive role despite very few minutes of screen time- he has eight minutes and six seconds (Chernoff). He first appears exiting out of a dark hallway, dressed entirely in black, and entering a wholly white hallway, contrasting starkly against it. There is no exposed skin, dehumanizing Vader to the audience and showing someone incapable of emotion except for anger and rage. Vader is shown lifting and choking the ship commander with one hand. This showcases Vader's power and, more importantly, his

ambition and drive to succeed in his mission. The story follows Luke Skywalker, Vader's son, and his adventure through the galaxy to save a princess. Luke, of course, has no idea that he is Vader's son, and Vader takes no more interest in Luke than he would any other rebel fighting the Empire. What creates the exception to this rule is when Luke meets Obi-Wan, who tells him stories about his father but does not confess that his father is Darth Vader. However, the Death Star provides an opportunity for a wrinkle to Vader's interest in Luke. In the next scene that Vader appears in, he is in a meeting with the Empire's top leadership, and he uses the force to choke an officer who questions him, only releasing when the highest-ranking officer in the room orders him to let go. Vader's following scene provides the cunning he has, torturing the previously mentioned princess and using the Death Star to destroy her home planet. Vader appears hunting for Obi-Wan when Luke and his party infiltrate the Death Star. The two fight, and Obi-Wan, right when Vader is about to kill him, evaporates into nothing after stating that if he dies, he will become more powerful than Vader could ever imagine. Luke watches this entire exchange and is livid. He sticks around for longer than makes sense to throw several extra bullets at the Empire's soldiers and Vader. Luke and the rebellion launch an assault on the Death Star, which is moving to attack the rebellion's secret base. Darth Vader moves to intercept and is eventually shoved into space and away so that Luke can destroy the Death Star. Sat away from the Death Star, it is implied that Darth Vader watches as a young, force-sensitive rebel pilot blows up the greatest weapon the galaxy has ever seen. The movie ends with Darth Vader's fate unknown.

The second movie of the trilogy, *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), follows immediately on what becomes of Vader: he survives. He is also dedicated to

hunting down the rebellion, sending out scouts to track down the secret rebel base. He finds the rebel base and leads an assault on it, narrowly missing the opportunity to capture rebel leadership, including Han Solo and Leia Organa, his daughter. Those two rebel leaders escape on an absurdly wounded Millennium Falcon and Vader, and the Empire pursues them through an asteroid field, eventually cutting them off when they land on a planet for repairs. Vader hires bounty hunters on that planet and captures Leia and Han, freezing Han in carbonite and making him a statue.

As this is happening, Luke Skywalker is training with Yoda and faces a vision of Vader; he ignores fear and defeats the vision. Vader's mask shatters, revealing Luke's face under the mask. After this, Luke goes to rescue his friend because he has visions of Han and Leia suffering at the hands of Vader. It is a trap, and the two begin to duel. As they fight, Vader comments on how much Luke has grown and remarks on his power. Vader eventually slices one of Luke's hands off, reminiscent of Dooku doing the same to a young Anakin Skywalker. Vader then reveals that he is Anakin's father and offers him the opportunity to join his side and destroy the Emperor. This offer is significant because Vader, although serving the Emperor, wants to break free and believes he does not have enough power to break his metaphorical shackles. Luke, being the protagonist he is, refuses and chooses instead to jump down a hole. As the film ends, Luke and Leia stand united, ready to swing back and rescue Han.

In the sixth installment, *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi* (1983), the protagonists of the film stage an elaborate rescue of Han Solo, who is a wall decoration for a crime lord outside of the Empire's sphere of influence. After they reunite and escape, Luke returns to Yoda, finding him on his deathbed and being near him as he dies. He then talks to the

ghost of Obi-Wan, who informs him that Vader is indeed his father and Leia is his twin sister. More specifically, he explains that his father, Anakin, became the monster of Darth Vader, but the only way for Luke to complete his training as a Jedi is to confront Vader. He returns to his friends and the rebels, and they plan an attack on the second Death Star.

Unknown to the rebellion, the Emperor arrives at the battle station, and he and Darth Vader establish that they want the partially complete weapon online as quickly as possible. In another elaborate plan, Luke, Han, and Leia go on a mission to weaken the Death Star's defenses. During the mission, Luke confides in Leia that they are twin siblings and their father is Darth Vader. Shortly after, he surrenders, and Vader takes him to the Emperor. Luke confronts the Emperor and Vader, and he and Vader duel. Vader enrages Luke by threatening Leia, and Luke slices off Vader's hand. The Emperor, pleased with this, orders Luke to kill his father and take his place, and Luke refuses, laying down his weapon. The Emperor tortures Luke, who begins pleading with the injured Vader to help him. Vader tosses the Emperor off a ledge, ending the reign of terror and redeeming himself. Luke helps Vader to a ship, but Vader is dying. Aware of this, Vader asks Luke to remove his mask so he can see his son's face before he dies. Anakin, helmet off, smiles at Luke, tells him that he was right about there being good in him, and asks him to tell his sister the same. Luke, determined still to save his father, resolves to carry him out, but Anakin informs him that Luke has already saved him- he gave him the opportunity, reason, and motivation to redeem himself. As the movie ends and the galaxy celebrates, Luke holds a funeral for his father. Afterward, he sees the ghosts of Obi-Wan, Yoda, and Anakin standing to the side of the celebration and looking onward.

Darth Vader's story ultimately boils down to the power of redemption and teaching. Vader does some nasty things, including massacring children, torturing rebels, and murdering innocents to ensure the Empire's power and future. As horrible as he is, however, he redeems himself with the help of Luke Skywalker. Leading up to this, Luke departs on a journey parallel to his father's, mainly through teetering between good and evil. The significant culmination of this is Luke surrendering himself to Vader and attacking him out of rage. When Luke severs Vader's hand, he looks at the now stump and notices that there is no flesh but machinery. This discovery puts everything into perspective for Luke. He realizes that his father is absurdly wounded- physically and emotionally- and that Vader will only do what people expect of him at this point. Then, and only then, does Luke throw down his lightsaber and communicate indirectly to Vader that he can do better. Luke provides Vader with support and belief for the first time since Obi-Wan and Anakin dueled. With this belief, Vader redeems himself in his eyes and his son's eyes when he tosses the Emperor over the ledge.

Vader's redemption is reminiscent of the human condition because people make mistakes, but how people try to improve after their mistakes define who they are. This is especially true in the present world, as people struggle to do better after making bad choices. For example, the reincarceration rate within five years of release for people who have spent at least one sentence in prison in America is seventy-seven percent (World Population Review Staff). However, the world is also beginning to realize that when people make mistakes, they may need help returning to the correct path. So many times, people do not forgive atrocities and are prepared to bury the people who commit those acts deep into a place in their minds where those people will never be capable of better.

The fact that Luke, who lost a hand, friends, and parts of his life to Vader while fighting the Empire, can separate Vader's actions from who he could be speaks volumes to the strength of character Luke has, and the impact such strength can have in a redemption story as it did with Vader.

Anakin's story in the prequel trilogy also paints part of the human condition- that it is incredibly easy to worry and stress about things outside of one's control and then make rash and angry decisions that springboard off that stress. This happens to Anakin in the second movie when he leaves his mission assignment to try and save his mother. He fears her death, acts to stop his fear from occurring, and then slaughters everyone responsible for it. He does the same thing in the following movie. He fears Padmé's death and takes even more steps to stop it from occurring- swearing allegiance to an evil emperor in the hope that he can stop her death- and betraying and killing friends, including his wife, in the process. Padmé's death is the most significant to Anakin, and he chooses to harm the person closest to him out of rage. However, the physical act of choking his pregnant wife was not the reason she died- it was the final domino that led to Padmé wishing herself to death, bringing Anakin's fears to fruition. It is natural to fear the future because of its many unknowns, but allowing fear to take control and commit irrational and extreme actions is not a healthy way to deal with it.

His mantle of "The Chosen One" also comes to fruition- when Vader kills Palpatine, he destroys the counterweight, affecting how the galaxy should run. That is to say that the opinions of the other Jedi in the prequel trilogy come true, but much later than they thought. His mantle also suggests that no matter the innate goodness or greatness in a person, everybody has the potential to do horrible things.

Darth Vader's trope exists in tragic villains of Shakespearean literature. For example, the *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* have villains, Shylock and Iago, respectively, that are complicated and exemplify the human condition as much as Darth Vader does. Shylock is a creditor of the main character, Antonio, in *The Merchant of Venice*. He is a merchant whom Venetians generally dislike because he is Jewish, and he is another example of how nasty circumstances can lead to people making evil choices. The story begins with Antonio, also a merchant, asking Shylock for a loan so his friend can court a wealthy young woman. Instead of something more practical, Shylock demands that collateral on the loan be a pound of flesh from Antonio. Antonio defaults on his loan, and the Venetian court finds a loophole in the law. They permit him to seek his pound of flesh, but if the weight is even slightly different than a pound or he draws any blood, the court will charge him with attempted murder. Shylock wisely does not attempt to retrieve his flesh, and the court punishes him for trying to ensnare Antonio by taking his assets and forcing him to convert to Christianity. Like Darth Vader, Shylock's story is a tragedy of forces beyond his control manipulating and turning a blank slate into a villain. The horrific circumstances and social status of Jews in the story are what drive Shylock to commit a sinister act, much like Emperor Palpatine's manipulation and Jedi hypocrisy lead to Anakin becoming Darth Vader.

Similarly, in *Othello*, Iago represents Darth Vader's choice in his downfall. Iago becomes jealous of Othello and angry with a decision he makes. Othello is wildly successful, and Iago is jealous of this, but the main driver of Iago's hate is that Othello promotes Cassius to lieutenant instead of Iago. From that moment, Iago pledges to destroy Othello by misleading Othello into believing his beloved, Desdemona, is

unfaithful. Othello decides to kill Desdemona, but Iago's wife tells him of Iago's plot while Othello is actively smothering Desdemona with a pillow. Iago shows up and then kills his wife, and Othello wounds Iago, allowing authorities to arrest him for trial. In the face of his trial, Othello kills himself. The parallels in the final scene with Iago and Othello are apparent: Anakin and Othello, the heroes, try to kill their significant others due to misleading information. Iago is also tragic, given that he also kills his significant other. One of the subplots of *Revenge of the Sith* (2005) is that Anakin is jealous of Obi-Wan's status, much like Iago and Othello. This leads to friction and, ultimately, a showdown brought about at least partly by one party's jealousy of the other.

Another key to the creation of Darth Vader is Machiavellianism, but not Vader's. Palpatine spends the prequel trilogy acquiring power by any means necessary for the sake of power. Palpatine's lust for power intersects with Vader because Anakin is the chosen one and has more raw talent than any other force user. Palpatine manipulates Vader into his service and uses him as the fist that enforces his law in the galaxy. Palpatine's ploy for power and subsequent methods of protecting that power are Machiavellian. Machiavelli notes that a leader being universally loved by constituents is the greatest protection from a coup because they are ruling with the consent of the governed. Palpatine's power grab throughout the prequels does not appear to be a power grab, making him very popular and allowing for the smooth political transition of the republic into the empire. Anakin allows himself to become a pawn in this game, and Vader suffers. All of this said, Vader redeems himself and rejects the shell of himself that Palpatine's Machiavellianism has made him, destroying the loyalty of Palpatine's most faithful servant.

Overall, Vader's story is a grand tragedy of a man who falls victim to fear and lives his life shackled to it simply because he believes that creating and enforcing a galaxy that he and Padmé could have lived in is the best choice for his anger. This is faulty logic, and the Emperor plays on his brokenness and uses Vader as an enforcer. Vader's subsequent redemption is also a testament to Vader for realizing that he can make a change and a difference, showing the human condition in a light that nobody, regardless of what they have done, is beyond redemption.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Loki

*“I am Loki, of Asgard, and I am burdened with glorious purpose.”*

Loki’s story exists to complement Thor as a hero. He is innately mischievous and enjoys causing a certain level of trouble. However, some of this stems from his jealousy of Thor, his brother, and his innate vulnerabilities stemming from his adoption and a general belief from those around him that he cannot change. The Marvel character, Loki, is based on Loki from ancient Norse mythology. Marvel adapted those stories for the greater Marvel universe, but some key differences exist. Loki has gained fame in recent years due to his recurrent appearances in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, appearing in *Thor* (2011), *The Avengers* (2012), *Thor: The Dark World* (2014), *Thor: Ragnarök* (2017), *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), and *Loki* (2021). These appearances build upon each other, and his development proves his eventually overcoming his jealousy and insecurities. However, he does some awful and snakelike things before he gets to this point.

Before examining his story, Loki’s abilities are considerably underrated and undervalued for the mayhem he causes. He is an Asgardian, which, in the Marvel Universe, makes him more challenging to kill. He also employs magic for various jobs, and there is no excellent gauge of how powerful that is, but he is significantly less powerful than many other magic users in the Marvel Universe. Beyond that, he is physically gifted- nowhere near as physically gifted as Thor or most superhumans in the Marvel Universe. Where Loki thrives is in a social arena. He will pit people against each other, convince frost giants that he is their best hope for the better, and even take the

place of others, particularly those in power. Therefore, Loki is not traditionally a villain that protagonists worry about- nobody worries about Loki and what he will do. In this way, he is criminally underrated, and his actual value as a villain stems from that.

In *Thor* (2011), Loki starts as Thor's friend, who follows Thor and provides counsel. Thor is boastful and prideful, believing himself greater and better than others. Eventually, he goads Thor into breaking a rule under the guise that Thor can prove himself mighty. The rule is a travel restriction to Jotunheim, home of the frost giants. Thor travels and fights with the frost giants, shattering the truce between Asgard and Jotunheim. Upon his return, Loki's father, Odin, banishes Thor to Earth and strips him of his power, which is also something that Loki had planned for Odin to do. The stipulation was that Thor could regain his abilities when he was worthy. Loki attacks Thor via an extremely powerful intermediary while Thor is in his vulnerable state. During the battle, Thor proves himself worthy and gains his power back. In essence, Loki's efforts resulted not in the dishonor of Thor but in his elevation because he learned what it means to be selfless and worthy. Thor returns to Asgard, prepared to fight Loki's rule. During Thor's adventures on Earth, Loki assumes power over Asgard as Odin enters the Odinsleep, the source of his life and power in Norse mythology (Viking Style Staff). With the king out of the picture, Loki plans to destroy Jotunheim using the Bifrost, arguably the most crucial tool on Asgard that allows for travel between the realms, outfitted as a weapon. Thor confronts Loki and the two battle. Thor destroys the Bifrost so that Loki cannot use it. The destruction creates a wormhole that drags Thor and Loki toward it, and Odin wakes up and tries to save them. Loki does not allow Odin to save him, preferring to instead fall into the wormhole, which leads into the furthest reaches of space. At the

film's end, Loki is influencing a scientist on Earth to experiment on the Tesseract, the subject of *The Avengers* (2012).

The furthest reaches of space happen to have Thanos as an occupant. The two meet and Thanos offers Loki a chance to conquer Earth to collect an incredibly powerful energy source called the Tesseract. Despite what looks like generosity in sending him to Earth and providing him with an army, Thanos makes sure Loki knows that his failure will destroy any hope of their remaining partnership. For Loki, this means that Thanos will try to kill him if he fails. With this, *The Avengers* (2012) starts, and Loki comes to Earth via a wormhole that the scientists created and steals the Tesseract, scientists, and Hawkeye, taking the latter two with a form of mind control, and they set out to open a wormhole. At the behest of Nick Fury, the Avengers informally assemble and respond to Loki's chaos, capturing him. However, Loki had planned this and used the opportunity to sow discord among the Avengers in his conversations with individual members. He plants distrust in the team, primarily related to Dr. Banner's detrimental presence because he is The Hulk and destructive. He also sows mistrust in the group by leading Captain America to discover that SHIELD, the security organization that deals with superheroes, is using the Tesseract to create weapons. Loki points out several instances of moral ambiguity that he strives to exploit, thereby making the members of the Avengers struggle to trust each other. In his escape from custody, Loki kills Coulson, a friend of the entire team, and the members are scattered and beaten up. The Avengers, divided and wounded, figure out Loki's plan and assemble to fight the army Loki summons through the wormhole. Loki created a problem that the Avengers bonded to solve, helping them grow as individuals and as a team. In *Loki* (2021), about nine years later, Loki discovers that his actions

literally created the Avengers and that they would not have formed otherwise. In the final scene of *The Avengers* (2012), the team goes their separate ways, which includes Thor taking Loki to Asgard for imprisonment.

In his first two appearances, Loki poses a genuine threat, but he functions more as a way for the protagonists to self-actualize and reach their full potential. Although secretive and manipulative in *Thor* (2011), Loki's actions directly result in Thor's fall from grace, leaving his only option to try and do better. He, of course, does and makes sure Odin hears of his actions. It is important to note that Loki's actions come from feeling betrayal. Odin adopted Loki as a baby during a war between Asgard and the Frost Giants. Odin took Loki away from his people and raised him as his own in the hope that he could bridge the two groups, and the two peoples could form a bond. Loki discovers his heritage and furiously decides to hurt Odin where he thinks it will hurt the most: Thor. Then, in *The Avengers* (2012), Loki operates almost in crazed desperation. He quickly tries to bring the army through the wormhole because he fears retaliation from Thanos should he fail. This side-plot comes full circle in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) as he tries to offer his services to Thanos to get close to him. That desperation drives *The Avengers* (2012) and how quickly its events force the protagonists to unite.

Following *The Avengers* (2012), Loki's next appearance came in 2014 in *Thor: The Dark World* (2014). In this film, Thor tries to save his love interest, Jane Foster, from a sickness they do not entirely understand. He takes her to Asgard, and they discover that an energy source called the aether uses Jane's body as a habitat. In this process, he finds a race of creatures, dark elves, that are bent on destroying everything and are after the aether. While the Asgardian doctors assess Jane, Thor sees his mother, who encourages

him to forgive and reconnect with Loki, and Loki, who tells him their mother is why he is so comfortable in his cell. The two brothers have words, and Thor storms out of the prison. The dark elves attack and take Jane, killing Thor and Loki's mother. Thor resolves to get Jane back, turning to Loki for assistance. When he approaches him in his cell again, Loki looks the same, but after a brief conversation, Loki reveals that he is masking his actual state with an illusion because he is in deep grief over losing his mother. Loki eventually agrees to help Thor, and the two travel to the dark elves' home, determined to get Jane back. They find the dark elves, and one of them stabs Loki, who falls over. After a lengthy deathbed conversation, Loki appears to die. However, he merely fakes his death, misleading Thor into believing that his brother is dead and gone. Thor then journeys further to Earth and stops the dark elves completely, saving Jane. In a mid-credits scene, Loki is alive and impersonating Odin.

Loki's next appearance was in *Thor: Ragnarök* (2017). Thor returns to Asgard after a lengthy time away and discovers that Loki has sent their father, Odin, to Earth to live in a nursing home, and Loki, using illusions, has taken Odin's place as ruler of Asgard. Thor reveals these illusions, and the two set out to Earth to find Odin. They find him in Sweden, preparing to pass on, where he informs both that they have an older sister imprisoned and will be set free upon his death. The last thing he says is that he loves them both, calling them sons and equals. Odin dies, and their sister, Hela, immediately appears and fights them. In the confusion, they travel to the world of Sakaar, where the most popular event is the Contest of Champions, where the Grandmaster creates games for betting and entertainment of the community. Time also flows differently on Sakaar, so the story picks up several weeks after Loki arrives. During that time, he befriends the

grandmaster and becomes his trusted friend. The story continues upon Thor's arrival, capture, and presentation to the grandmaster as a possible champion. Upon seeing his strength, the grandmaster decides that Thor will battle the ultimate champion the next day. With the grandmaster and Loki watching, Thor discovers that the ultimate champion is The Hulk, and the two fight to a draw- creating a proposition that the two battle every time an event takes place as the main card. Eventually, Thor befriends The Hulk and the woman who captured him, Valkyrie, and they collectively capture Loki and create an escape plan. During the escape, Loki tries to betray them, but Thor, expecting it, stops him and tells him he believes he can be better. The trio escapes, leaving Loki behind. Thor, Valkyrie, and The Hulk return to Asgard to fight Hela and start to lose badly. Suddenly, Loki shows up to help with a small army of Sakaar's other champions. They evacuate the citizens of Asgard, and as they do so, Thor resolves to cause Ragnarök to destroy the seat of Hela's power, thereby eliminating her. Thor sends Loki into a vault to activate the artifact that will cause Ragnarök, an event that will destroy Asgard. While Loki is in there, he runs across the Tesseract and stops to look at it. After activating Ragnarök, Loki and Thor escape aboard a giant ship full of all the refugees and leave Hela for dead. In one of the movie's final scenes, Thor and Loki are face to face, and Thor thinks Loki is not there, but Loki decides to stay with Thor, a changed man. The two resolve to lead the giant ship of Asgardians to look for a home.

Loki's third and fourth appearances show his humanity and that Thor also recognizes the issues with him, Loki, and the rest of their family. It also indicates that Loki turns a corner after he realizes Thor believes he is capable of more than lying and stealing and that, in Thor's eyes, Loki will always be his brother regardless of what he

does. Essentially, Loki's deeply rooted insecurities stemming from being the adopted son next to Thor and being a frost giant are put to rest as Thor and Loki return to each other's good graces through their parents' deaths.

Loki's next appearance was in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018). Thanos boards the Asgardian ship, now called the Asgardian Ark, and destroys everything as he looks for the Tesseract. This brings Loki, Thor, and The Hulk face-to-face with Thanos, and the latter two of them cannot successfully defeat him. With all his allies wounded and out of the fight, Loki approaches Thanos, pledging loyalty but preparing to stab him when he is close enough. This ploy does not work, and Thanos holds Loki like a rag doll, promising that he will murder Thor and everyone still alive on the ship if Loki does not give up the Tesseract. Loki, glancing at Thor, gives it up, and Thanos kills him. At the movie's end, Thanos erases half of the universe's population, causing a problem that needs fixing in the next film.

In *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), the remaining Avengers strive to travel back in time and put the previous film's events right. Part of this involves a team going to 2012, right after The Avengers stopped Loki from bringing an army through a wormhole after *The Avengers* (2012). During the mission, the imprisoned Loki gets ahold of the Tesseract and teleports away. This is the only time he appears in the movie. The movie ends with the Avengers fixing most of the problems Thanos caused.

The Loki who teleports away in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) appears again in the first season of *Loki* (2021). He teleports to the middle of Mongolia, where a small squad of soldiers teleports with him and captures him. They take him to a place outside of time, where he learns about the Time Variance Authority, or TVA, whose job is to ensure that

time follows the preset path, always to avoid the creation of a multiverse. Here, Loki, who did not undergo three more movies of character development, learns of his destiny: to die at the hand of Thanos on the Asgardian Ark. He also learns that the variants of himself are the primary troublemakers for the TVA and account for many of the disturbances. The TVA agent Mobius, on edge due to a Loki-variant attacking their soldiers, employs the Loki the story follows to help track the other version of himself. Loki discovers that cataclysmic extinction events that leave no survivors allow someone to mess with the flow of time because nothing in the future will change. The TVA and Loki track down the second variant. At the first chance he gets and after getting over the shock of the other variant being a girl named Sylvie, he offers his services to her either as a distraction so the TVA can capture Sylvie or to genuinely help her. Either way, a three-way standoff with Loki, Sylvie, and the TVA ensues because the TVA thinks Loki flipped and Sylvie does not trust Loki. Sylvie escapes with Loki following, and they find themselves in a dire situation. They move forward in time to a planet on the verge of destruction, from which they cannot escape. They hatch an elaborate scheme to get off the planet that mainly involves changing the course of history and getting the evacuation shuttle off the planet, which is not supposed to happen. The two take a train and have several hours to kill, and as they get closer to their destination, they discuss more about their respective experiences. Upon arriving at their destination, they discover they are too late to change the course of history and resign themselves to their deaths. They then have a semi-romantic moment, allowing the TVA to track and capture them again.

Loki and Sylvie are separated into different holding cells. There, they each reveal to a TVA agent and Mobius that the agents are also variants that have been pulled out of

time. Upon realizing this, Mobius helps Loki escape, but the highest-ranking TVA agent stops them and prunes, touching someone with a stick that makes them immediately disappear, Mobius and presumably kills him. The same high-ranking agent orders that the agent Sylvie talked to prune Loki and Sylvie, but this agent lets them go, and they fight through the TVA to reach the Timekeepers, the people in charge of the TVA. Upon reaching their destination, Sylvie and Loki discover that the Timekeepers are robots controlled by someone else with actual power. The TVA prunes Loki, teleporting him to a place called the void. Sylvie questions the TVA officer that pruned Loki, who reveals that the void is at the end of time, and she prunes herself, heading to the void as well. The void ends up being a wasteland with a monster, Alioth, that destroys everything it comes across. Sylvie and Loki run into other Loki variants, which fight among themselves and Mobius. Mobius and one of the older variants distract Alioth so that Sylvie can control the monster's mind and let Loki and Sylvie pass him.

Sylvie and Loki get past Alioth and come across a large building on top of an asteroid called "The Citadel at the End of Time." Upon entering the building, they meet He Who Remains, who says, "So you came to kill the devil." This line is one of the best in any Marvel project because it points out that things are never as they seem, especially when Loki is involved. This line also is a callout to ask who the "devil" is in the scenario because Loki and Sylvie, at baseline, look more malicious and devil-esque, especially with the horns on their head that are a signature of every version of Loki presented in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. However, they are the protagonists of *Loki* (2021) and are talking to the man who has essentially enslaved variants to work for the TVA. He Who Remains reveals that he has meticulously planned history and employs the TVA to keep it

from straying. He tells his story that a version of him in every universe discovered that it was possible to jump between the multiverse but that more bloodthirsty variants of him had resolved to conquer the multiverse. His keeping the timeline perfectly linear has protected the timeline of all Marvel Cinematic Universe movies from invasion up to this point. He also reveals that the multiverse will open upon his death, and there is no predicting what will happen. At the end of his speech, he admits that he does not know what happens after their conversation but that Sylvie and Loki have a choice. They can either kill him and risk a war with his variants or step in and lead the TVA. Loki pleads with Sylvie not to kill He Who Remains because he wants to keep her safe and fears that He Who Remains is correct. Sylvie sends Loki back to the TVA headquarters and kills the surrendering He Who Remains. Upon Loki's return to the TVA, he realizes that a statue of someone who looks like He Who Remains has been erected, indicating that the variants from other multiverses have already arrived. The series ends with Loki looking horror-struck at the result and appearance of the TVA.

Given Loki's story across the Marvel Cinematic Universe, several recurring themes exist. The first is that someone's worst enemy can easily be someone close. This principle underlies much of the relationship between Thor and Loki because Thor is the hero, and Loki, although he is Thor's brother, goes to great lengths to ensure that Thor is sent through pain and anguish whenever possible. This is the status quo of the relationship between the two initially. It evolves as Thor and Loki's connectedness ultimately helps Loki believe that he can do better, at least for long enough to act in *Thor: Ragnarök* (2017) and *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018). Their natural closeness drives a lot of their conflict and much of their character development.

Another theme is that free will is not a light thing. Philosophically speaking, there are a few notable belief systems regarding free will. One is from Plato, who states in *The Republic* that the inner soul strives for justice, but the outside world is full of baseless passions that the person must look inward to overcome and choose to rise above said desires (O'Connor and Franklin). Plato's beliefs characterize Loki's decisions until Thor communicates his belief in Loki in *Thor: Ragnarök* (2017). Loki believes that his innately mischievous nature will be reflected in every decision. Loki then decides that he will do better, leading to his supposed reformation by the movie's end. Another notable belief system comes from Thomas Hobbes, who believes all decisions are acted on by outside agents and freedom from those agents is true liberty or free will (O'Connor and Franklin). Loki and Sylvie discovering that their actions and the actions of everybody in the Marvel Cinematic Universe are scripted due to the TVA squashing anything outside their plan illustrates Hobbes' conception of the relationship between free will and order. Essentially, free will always brings a certain level of chaos, which cannot coexist with universal order.

Another theme is that it is easy to be self-destructive and to be one's worst enemy. Loki's first two appearances in *Thor* (2011) and *The Avengers* (2012) provide context for this. His presence drives a hero or heroes to become the best version of themselves to stop a threat. Thor does in *Thor* (2011) and immediately fights Loki to foil his plans. The Avengers also do this when they unite to fight off the invading army that Loki brings through the wormhole. Both instances prove that some level of strife provides the best conditions for growth as people. Thor's banishment due to Loki's manipulation offers an opportunity for Thor's development just as Loki's further manipulation of the Avengers

scatters and all but defeats them, thus setting the stage for them to come together in a more challenging context.

The last and possibly most crucial theme is Loki's statement of individuality throughout his appearance. He always does what he wants and what he feels is most in his nature, usually to his detriment. Until *Loki* (2021) premiered, this lesson was primarily subtextual, but upon the premiere, that changed. *Loki* features six prominent Loki variants, the two main protagonists and four others who appear briefly towards the end of the series. All six stand out despite technically being a version of the same person. They all have very different experiences that influence their decisions. It shows that if the same character can have variations that are so different, each person is truly unique. Loki's variations are all morally complex, showing that morality is rarely ever simple to the individual. They all struggle in morally ambiguous situations, showing that moral struggle often starts at the individual level. However, within that is the individual capacity to change and choose to do the right thing. Loki's development across his appearances characterizes him slowly accepting this choice that he is not destined to be evil and that he has a choice to do better.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Thanos

*“I am inevitable.”*

Thanos is a villain who has received much attention in the last several years due to his prominence in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. His appearance is the culmination of twenty-three movies, and *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) drew a large audience for no reason other than seeing how the Infinity Saga would end. Thanos delivers in every conceivable way as the most significant threat presented in any Marvel movie to that point. His appearance, abilities, and, most importantly, ideology make him a villain who is difficult to forget. He has a doctrine of correcting overpopulation by killing half the universe, not any particular half, but just half. In this way, he is an extremist who leans on violence to justify his beliefs.

Thanos’s appearance is intimidating. He is as tall as the Hulk, about ten feet, extremely hard-muscled, purple, and usually dressed in armor. He dwarfs everybody in the same room, and his abnormal purple skin tone makes him pop from the background. Beyond his appearance, he is incredibly strong and a gifted fighter. In his first on-screen fight, he fights the Hulk and knocks him out with his bare hands in about ten seconds. He also commands a large army that he utilizes to conquer the galaxy planet by planet and execute half of each planet’s population. Interestingly, he has no wish to rule, almost viewing himself as a necessary evil to ensure life’s longevity. In this way, he is somewhat of a contradiction because his army’s effectiveness proves he is a decent leader. He believes that life cannot take care of itself because leadership refuses to take extreme measures to correct overpopulation, but he has no wish to try his hand at governing.

His appearances before *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) are very few and just enough to communicate that two villains from previous movies, Loki and Ronin, brutal killers trying to attain control and kingship of societies by force, are terrified of him. Thanos recruits them each to obtain one of the infinity stones, which are keys of control over each stone's specific dimension: time, space, reality, mind, soul, and power. Loki succeeds in obtaining his stone but cannot defeat The Avengers and escape Earth, thereby failing. Ronin also prevails and obtains his stone, but becomes power-hungry and resolves to destroy Thanos, but The Guardians of the Galaxy stop him before he can make it to him. In the brief scenes in which either character is with Thanos, Thanos tells them in no uncertain terms that should they fail, he will kill them both in cruel and twisted ways. There is a scene in *The Avengers* (2012) where Loki communes with him and leaves staring into the distance and looking terrified. Similarly, in *The Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), Ronin meets with Thanos, who informs him that if he fails, Thanos will kill him, and Ronin looks terrified. All this is to say that Thanos, although not the direct subject of any movies before *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), is a force who does as he pleases.

His first full-length appearance in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) highlights him as highly driven. His goal in the movie is to obtain the six infinity stones and use their collective power to snap his fingers and create a new reality on a universal scale, almost like a genie. He attacks the Asgardian Ark, already with the first infinity stone, and makes fools out of The Hulk, Thor, and Loki, beating The Hulk and Thor in hand-to-hand combat and killing Loki. He obtains the second stone from the Ark and then travels to the third, where he fights a segment of The Guardians of the Galaxy, including Gamora and

Nebula, his adopted daughters who turned away from him. He defeats this team of heroes and kidnaps Gamora because she knows where the fourth stone is. Thanos and Gamora travel to the fourth stone, and he speaks with Gamora and argues that the planets he has visited have known nothing but peace and prosperity since he left. Upon reaching the site of the fourth stone, a sage tells him that he must sacrifice what he loves to gain the stone. He throws Gamora off a cliff and obtains the fourth stone. He then sets out for the fifth stone, guarded by part of The Avengers and part of The Guardians of the Galaxy. Thanos defeats all of them, but Iron Man is finally the first to land a meaningful blow on Thanos, which does nothing but give a small cut to his cheek. Thanos then moves to the location of the sixth and final stone, guarded by an army, the rest of The Avengers, and the rest of The Guardians of the Galaxy. He marches through all of them, obtains the last stone, kills the hero Vision, and snaps. One by one, heroes in their various locations turn to dust and disappear, leaving exactly half of them still alive.

The story picks up immediately after in *Avengers: Endgame* when the two teams of heroes unite and resolve to attack Thanos- to avenge the fallen. Thanos had retired to a different planet where he had been leading a simple life farming for his existence. The Avengers track a similar energy surge from the first snap, thinking Thanos has used them again. The Avengers travel to the location, ambush, and decapitate him. Before they kill him, Thanos reveals that he is injured from the consecutive use of the stones and that the second snap was to destroy the stones and any hope of undoing his actions. After his death, the Avengers time-travel to reassemble the stones and use them to bring everyone back. However, while time traveling, they alert a previous version of Thanos to their presence, and he follows them through time with a massive army. At this point, Thanos

functions as the most significant physical threat the Avengers have seen and provides a moment of solidarity across all corners of the Marvel universe. Although he fully intends to use the stones again, there is less of a focus on his motivations. Of course, The Avengers defeat him, thus ending the Infinity Saga.

Although stemming from a place with at least partial truth, Thanos' beliefs are severely misguided. He acquired his beliefs by watching his own once great civilization on Titan, Saturn's moon, deteriorate under the stress of supporting a population that was too large. Ultimately, the society on Titan destroyed itself as its inhabitants struggled to find food and fought over anything they could find, leaving Thanos as the sole survivor. Thanos also explains in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) that he warned his government that they needed to reduce the population as quickly as possible, meaning systematic killing. Ultimately, the government did not do as Thanos suggested and failed to fix the problem in time, leading Thanos to believe that his suggestion was the only way to correct the grave issue.

Multiple times, there has been an occurrence in the United States of a group resorting to riots and violence for various reasons. However, two of the most notable instances of this in the previous ten years were in 2016 and 2020, shortly after the Presidential election results. In 2016, after Donald Trump became the President-elect, there were multiple nights of protests nationwide ranging from remarkably peaceful demonstrations to vandalisms after anarchists overtook the protest (Eversley et al.). The more violent ones featured protesters carrying baseball bats, smashing windows, and vandalizing cars (Eversley et al.). The 2016 riots mirrored those in 2020, when there were many protests after Joe Biden became the President-elect (Lenghi et al.). The violent

rioters this time had Molotov cocktails and glass bottles that they threw through the front doors and windows of businesses (Lenghi et al.). Additionally, two months after the original riots after the 2020 election, another group of rioters stormed the U.S. capitol building to attempt to stop the election confirmation (Wise). This group, incited by the sitting President Donald Trump, made it into the hallways of one of the most well-protected public buildings in the world (Wise). At least one gun went off, and one person was shot and killed (Wise). The people participating in the riots were extremists, utterly convinced that the election was rigged and that they were true patriots trying to set America straight. Their respective instances differ from the course of action that Thanos takes; however, the rioters failed to succeed significantly in their violent actions. Ultimately, because both the rioters and Thanos eventually failed to make any real change according to their extremist beliefs, their use of violence did not justify their beliefs.

However, because the violence did not justify beliefs, there is a potential that had Thanos or the rioters succeeded, their actions would be considered patriotic and loving to a lost universe and nation. This caveat exists because, in all conflicts, the winner writes history. For example, when America's founding fathers started the Revolutionary War, their actions in response to grave injustices may have seemed extreme given the context of the time: America was a colony, and Great Britain was in charge of the colony. However, because America won the war, the narrative shifts from America acting like an insolent child rebelling from their parents to America throwing off an oppressive regime bent on preserving control. The facts of the buildup to the war do not change in any way, but the way society remembers it does and thus reduces the perceived extremism.

Taking all levels of violence to be equally awful, which is not in any way accurate and problematic at baseline, Thanos and then the rioters in 2016, 2020, and 2021 are all equally wrong. Thanos' motivations were to solve a problem regardless of cost, not because he was angry or had a personal vendetta, but because he wanted to fix a problem before it resulted in disastrous consequences. His human counterparts decided to riot, believing they were correcting a grave injustice. The political extremists are just as justified as Thanos' because their actions are also a means to an end of correcting injustice and trying to create a better world. With this idea in mind, however, the rioters were not close to Thanos in the amount and intensity of violence caused. In the way that extremist beliefs can incite violence, Thanos reflects the rioters.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Deadpool

*“Doing the right thing is messy. You want to fight for what’s right, sometimes you have to fight dirty.”*

Deadpool is not a mainstream Marvel character like Iron Man, Spider-Man, and Thor. However, Deadpool, Wade Wilson, occupies a niche in the greater Marvel universe: occasionally morally ambiguous or morally wrong, comedic, antihero. An antihero is “a protagonist or notable figure who is conspicuously lacking in heroic qualities” (“Anti-hero”). Deadpool fits cleanly into the antihero role and possesses several other strange abilities beyond those of a superhero in a comic: He routinely breaks the fourth wall and employs comedy that lacks all sense of decorum. In all of this, however, he is a broken man who may, quite literally, never need to confront mortality. Deadpool’s story is about responsibility and selfishness, which do not often mix. His popularity, however, lagged behind how interesting his character is. He appeared in *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (2009), played by Ryan Reynolds, but his appearance was flawed and, overall, a horrible representation of the character. Several years later, however, Ryan Reynolds, the same person, starred in *Deadpool* (2016) and *Deadpool 2* (2018) and provided an expression of the character much more faithful to the source material. The two movies are also rated R, leading to a unicorn: a superhero movie that did incredibly well and was not meant for children or adolescents. Deadpool’s popularity has skyrocketed, and his most recent films did incredibly well amidst a rise in superhero fatigue because the character and interpretation were unconventional.

Traditional heroes have a moral compass. A couple of prominent examples of this would be Luke Skywalker from *Star Wars* or Captain America, who almost always strive

toward kindness, humility, and goodness. Antiheroes tend to do the same actions as standard heroes, but they may do those actions for different reasons or in ways that are very unlike a hero. An example is a hero doing the right thing strictly because he wants to impress any woman present, having no issues with collateral damage or killing people. Deadpool does both of those things in *Deadpool* (2016). In the two major fights, he kills every person he fights, and he does it on a revenge tour that puts his love interest, Vanessa, in danger. In his origin story, Deadpool becomes disfigured and is concerned that Vanessa will reject him due to his appearance. His revenge tour is based on finding the scientists who scarred him so that they can fix his face and he can reveal himself to Vanessa. During this process, Deadpool never informs Vanessa that he is alive, and the scientists discover Vanessa and her connection to Deadpool and decide to kidnap her. Deadpool tries to do extra work involving killing people rather than doing what would be undeniably more morally correct: not killing anyone, moving on from the pain inflicted upon him, and returning to Vanessa as he is. This course of action would undeniably be more simple and arguably braver.

Another thing to remember is that a superhero deciding to kill someone, or even accidentally killing someone, is a massive deal. For example, in the Daredevil comic series between 2019 and 2021, Daredevil returns to hero work after rehabilitating a broken back and getting into a brawl with an average, street-level criminal (Zdarsky). He is so out of practice that he kills the criminal to help guarantee his survival (Zdarsky). This is highly uncharacteristic of Daredevil because he has fought minor deities single-handedly and with help. With this in mind, Daredevil murdering someone is highly irregular, and it causes a ripple effect throughout the story. This includes Spider-Man

making Daredevil promise not to take up the mantle again and to retire, but Daredevil, fraught with guilt, eventually returns to the mantle as if his skills had not declined (Zdarsky). However, Daredevil is still incredibly guilty and submits himself to the justice system, which incarcerates him (Zdarsky). Daredevil's decision to surrender himself is an excellent benchmark for the remorse and regret a superhero should have when they kill someone. That said, Deadpool has virtually none and even goes so far as to make jokes about the people he kills. This is Deadpool's most prominent distinguishing characteristic that makes him an antihero.

He accomplishes a heroic action in *Deadpool*: stopping a group of scientists from experimenting on people in impossible situations. The result is undeniably good, but the methods are less so. Often, having an antihero be the protagonist of a story should leave the audience thinking at least one of two things. First is wondering if the ends justify the means, and second is a reminder that outward appearance does not reflect someone's inner character. In this case, the audience should be thinking about both regarding Deadpool. This is expected regarding Deadpool's superhuman abilities and sense of humor.

Deadpool's origin story begins when Wade Wilson was dishonorably discharged from Canadian special forces and then found work as a freelance mercenary. Eventually, he meets Vanessa, a prostitute with whom he falls in love and proposes. Shortly after, he receives a terminal cancer diagnosis, with no hope of fighting off the diagnosis with the usual treatments. Due to Wilson's history in special forces and as a mercenary, a recruiter talks him into subjecting himself to experimental therapies. The treatments are far from what Wilson had in mind. The scientists involved try to awaken any mutant genes in his

body via a serum they inject him with and then torture his body into a fight-or-flight response that manifests in him mutating. After weeks of gruesome torture, the scientists put him in a chamber, restricting oxygen flow and leaving Wilson on the edge of asphyxiation. Finally, his mutant genes manifest, horribly disfiguring his face and developing a regeneration power that cures him of his cancer. This regeneration power can also extend to entire limbs, bullet wounds, and, theoretically, can grow his body back entirely from a single cell. Now essentially immortal, he attacks the scientists and escapes in the confusion. During his revenge tour, trying to cure his disfigurement, he dons the red suit so nobody can see him bleed. Eventually, he meets a couple of X-Men, who try to convince him he can be responsible and be a traditional hero, which he rejects. This may have to do with the fact that Deadpool has transcended the conventional idea of mortality. Killing him is more complicated than the average comic book hero or villain. This understanding and dark origin lead him to look after only himself and Vanessa.

Another iconic characteristic of Deadpool is that his humor is incredibly raunchy. Typically, much of it involves sex, sex organs, pop culture references, death, creative threats, or all five at once. He also talks continuously, more so than many other comic book characters. In the comics, his speech bubbles have a yellow backdrop rather than a white one, and the font looks more scribbled than other characters. This is highly uncommon as most speech bubbles are either black on white or white on black, but the reason is that his mutations also scarred his vocal cords, which led him to have a distinct, gravelly voice. This also may have to do with Deadpool routinely breaking the fourth wall by knowing he is in a comic book or movie and directly addressing his audience. This creates some genuinely hilarious encounters. For example, he comments about how

there are only two X-Men in his film instead of more because the studio did not want to pay to include more X-Men. An element of this is true: Fox only budgeted \$58 million for *Deadpool* and then \$110 million for *Deadpool 2* because the first was successful (*The Numbers*). For reference, the lowest budgets for the Marvel Cinematic Universe to date are *Ant-Man* (2015) and *Ant-Man and the Wasp* (2018), with a budget of \$130 million each, and the highest budget was *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) with a \$400 million budget (Otway). Further providing a precise representation includes a post-credits scene of him jumping to the climax of *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (2009), where he kills the previous iteration of himself that was inaccurate and unentertaining. This is precisely the sort of thing that Deadpool does. He has been known in comic books to transcend the panels and even talk directly to the writers. In fact, in a comic mini-series titled *Deadpool Kills the Marvel Universe*, he does what the title says, including transporting himself to the comic's writers' room and slaughtering the story's writers. All the intrigue and free storytelling make Deadpool an incredibly alluring character for audiences simply because he is different. Therefore, it should be no surprise that the movies grossed \$781 million and \$786 million worldwide, respectively (*The Numbers*). Even the ratings from *Rotten Tomatoes* are phenomenal, with 85% and 84%, respectively (*Rotten Tomatoes*). The interesting part of this data is that the ratings and box office were virtually identical, but the budget of the first was half that of the second. A possible reason for the increase in funding is that the studio rewarded the creators after they exceeded expectations by so much. However, virtually identical results point to the fact that most people who would see a rated-R movie did not change between the release of the two films.

Deadpool is an intriguing spin on classic superheroes and is, therefore, an intriguing spin on modern superhero movies, of which there have been a lot in the twenty-first century. Since the beginning of 2008, there have been thirty-two Marvel Cinematic Universe films. However, as movies adjusted back to a non-pandemic world, a fascinating occurrence started: the “Marvel formula” stopped delivering as it had been. The “Marvel formula” is an extension of the hero’s journey, where the protagonist seeks to prevent a malevolent force bent on the destruction or control of the world, complete with copious amounts of CGI and well-known actors (Chong). There were relatively few whispers of this back in 2016, and superhero fatigue was largely unheard of, so *Deadpool’s* (2016) success was somewhat of a surprise because it modified the formula. Its increased profanity and raunchy humor provided less of a narrative confined by keeping with the PG-13 rating. In making *Deadpool* (2016) rated R, the creators added the elements, making the movie feel even more adult and stick out from the string of movies.

For the casual movie-goer, superhero movies are best in moderation. This means that to continually make superhero movies, as the film industry has been doing for the last fifteen years, some need to go beyond the standard superhero story, as the pair of *Deadpool* movies have done. At this time, superhero fatigue is much more real for the superhero movie market than ever. More recent Marvel Cinematic Universe movies such as *Ant-Man: Quantumania* (2023) and *The Eternals* (2021) were met with rotten tomatoes scores of 46% and 47%, significantly less than Marvel’s standard of at least 80%. Their performances make them prime examples of superhero fatigue, as critics were less impressed despite audience scores on par with the rest of Marvel’s standards (*Rotten*

*Tomatoes*). On a similar note, *Deadpool 3* is slated to release in 2024, provided that current writers' and actors' strikes do not force the movie to be delayed. As superhero fatigue has increased and the quality of recent superhero movies has stayed the same, I predict that the difference of *Deadpool 3* will make it the trilogy's most successful. In short, *Deadpool*'s popularity is not going anywhere and will likely increase.

*Deadpool*'s ideology is to win at all costs and do it with as much swagger as possible, and it has become more acceptable in modern society, resulting in several distasteful events and scandals. Attached to his ideology is that doing what is right means doing what is best for oneself, which is especially prevalent when people are in fear. For example, in the opening months of the Covid-19 pandemic, people were in hysteria over toilet paper. Several viral videos had regular, everyday people so concerned for the future that they were wrestling each other over toilet paper.

Beyond toilet paper, I believe two scandals encapsulate *Deadpool*'s ideology in the real world: Enron and Bountygate. Enron was the leading company that dealt with energy and commodities throughout the 1990s (Segal et al.). It was also a Wall Street darling, turning out record growth, and was recognized as the nation's most innovative company by Forbes (Segal et al.). Federal law mandates that publically traded companies, like Enron, disclose all of their holdings, earnings, and losses to investors on an annually released 10-k document that is available to the public. However, Enron management employed several practices to fool the average investor on these reports. It used mark-to-market accounting, marking previous assets as more valuable than they were and making Enron appear more valuable to the average customer (Segal et al.). Enron management also created numerous off-the-books shell companies that would suddenly buy poorly

performing assets from Enron to hide losses (Segal et al.). However, Enron's role in California's energy market is most devious. Enron executives lobbied for free energy trade to benefit themselves, and the California state legislature approved it (Segal et al.). After its approval, Enron purposefully withheld energy to create an artificial shortage, making California government workers believe they needed to buy extra power from Enron, which conveniently increased its energy prices (Segal et al.). Eventually, this understandably angered the California citizens and caused rolling blackouts throughout the state (Segal et al.). Everything Enron did was technically legal at the time, and its leadership dabbled in morally gray areas to achieve the highest profits possible, much like Deadpool would do anything to win. The Enron scandal considers the second thought that comes with antiheroes: if the outward appearance reflects the inward character. On the outside, Enron was one of the most successful companies of its era, but on the inside, it was rotten to the core and lied to everybody in the hope of getting ahead.

Bountygate is a scandal that the New Orleans Saints of the National Football League underwent in 2011. Their defensive coordinator, head coach, general manager, and defensive captains, among others, would put bounties on the opposing team's offensive stars to intentionally injure them and thereby impede their ability to win games and make it easier for the defense to shut down an offense (Pinak). It worked. In a playoff game in early 2010, the Minnesota Vikings complained after the 31-28 loss that Saints defenders were purposely trying to injure their players (Pinak). The Saints went from that game to the Superbowl, where they won. About six months later, an anonymous source blew the whistle on the operation, and the NFL began an investigation that would result in a collective sixty-one games suspended spread across seven players and coaches, the

loss of multiple draft picks, and an indefinite ban on the defensive coordinator who was responsible for starting the bounties (Pinak). The Saints won, and they did so at all costs. Ultimately, Bounty Gate asks the first of the thoughts associated with antiheroes: if the ends justify the means. I do not believe they do because their Superbowl victory will always have an asterisk next to it. After all, there is no way to know if their team would have been as successful as it was.

Because of the increasing acceptance of this mindset in everyday society, it becomes increasingly essential for people to strive to treat others around them with compassion and respect, regardless of circumstance or context. For this reason, Deadpool is not a great example of how people should treat others- insulting and dishonoring them. Deadpool is an antihero, a less-than-stellar role model, and represents a version of the counterculture of superhero films in the twenty-first century. However, Deadpool is also funny, creative, and upstanding in terms of the results of his actions. The culmination of Deadpool as an antihero is an analysis of any morally gray area, and, as an antihero, Deadpool leaves his audiences wondering if the ends justify the means and if outward appearance reflects his inner character. Ultimately, there is something incredibly heroic about somebody willing to do morally wrong things for the right reasons so that those protected do not need to cross the threshold of right and wrong.

## CHAPTER SIX

### The Purge

*“It’s an unwritten Purge rule that we don’t save lives. Tonight, we take lives.”*

*The Purge* franchise seeks to answer the question of how evil humans could be if there were no laws or traditional societal norms to safeguard against it. For example, murder is illegal and punishable by life in prison or death in some places. Even if it were legal and all else were equal, there would still be a societal expectation that those who have murdered and gone unpunished do not attain jobs or traditional privileges associated with a member of society in fair standing. The purge takes all that away in a universe where a political party bent on ridding America of its dark side decided to implement a nationwide, twelve-hour period when all crime is legal, and emergency services are on hold. This setting provides a place to experiment and hypothesize on logical extremes of the current world circumstance. However, this pales compared to the gruesome and heinous acts committed by regular people and the logical extensions that affect acceptable behaviors. Beyond the movies, there is also a purge limited series that ran in 2018 and 2019. Overall, the purge shows that some people have a propensity to draw towards violence in the media.

The story of the purge spans five movies that came out nonlinearly. The first movie in the canon and the fourth movie made is *The First Purge* (2018), telling how the purge came into being. In 2012, an America that failed to recover significantly after the 2008 economic recession elected its first government that favored the New Founding Fathers of America, who attained office on promises to find a way for America to regain its economic prowess. Their commitment includes lowering the unemployment rate as

part of its economic improvement, which is significant because it lays the foundation for the tensions between upper and lower socio-economic classes. At any rate, the New Founding Fathers of America announced that Staten Island would serve as the experiment of the purge. People can enter and leave, but nobody goes in or out once the purge begins. Of course, the government keeps close watch over the results of the purge as they want to sell the rest of America on the idea and make it a national holiday. The idea is that all crime happens in one night, making the rest of the year almost wholly void of crime. The movie follows a drug dealer who does not leave Staten Island because of the amount of merchandise and cash he is sitting on. Multiple competitors and underlings come to kill him and take his things, but they all fail. As the night drags on, a drug addict mutters about his need to purge before attacking the drug dealer. Later, masked civilians enter the streets and murder people much more efficiently than others the rest of the night. The New Founding Fathers' top two leaders are monitoring the situation closely, and one of them reveals that he hired mercenaries to dress as civilians and kill people for two reasons: to make the purge appear successful and to start balancing the wealth disequilibrium. The mercenaries kill the survivors, and the movie ends.

The second movie chronologically and the first movie made was *The Purge* (2013), set in 2022. The purge has been a national occurrence since the trial run on Staten Island, and the New Founding Fathers of America are still in power. The movie follows a wealthy family whose father sells purge security systems that encase a house entirely in a wall of bulletproof metal. The family locks themselves in their home. Shortly into the night, a man runs up to the house, exhausted, and pleads to the family to grant him entrance. The family's youngest son lets the man in, who promptly disappears into the

house. Shortly after, a group of purgers assault the house looking for the homeless man and make entrance because the security system is a sham. A group of the family's neighbors follow the purgers into the home and dispatch them, but they reveal that they are there to harm the family because of the family's elevated social status. The homeless man and the mother overpower the neighbors and hold them hostage, waiting for the purge to end. With five minutes to go, the neighbor's leader tries to gain the upper hand over the mother and gets their nose broken. As the movie ends, the news reports that weapons and security system sales have promoted a booming economy- a credit to the most successful purge to date. The station then changes to a man talking about his loss of patriotism due to him losing his family the night before.

The follow-up movie *Purge: Anarchy* (2014) took a vastly different narrative, introducing the audience to government death squads and resistance to the idea of the purge. The movie has a few critical moments that affect the franchise. Two protagonists hijack the television airwaves shortly before the purge and announce that a coalition of freedom fighters will protect the streets. Their pledge is close to the existence of a private military and certainly a case of vigilantism, as it is an organization with no official governing authority that takes justice into its own hands. At any rate, this organization makes some headway and dispatches several other groups bent on celebrating the purge in the more traditional sense. The rest of the protagonists discover that the government has been sending death squads to eliminate more people from the lower classes in recent years. With the sudden existence of an organization bent on protecting those people, the death squads specifically targeted anybody bent on playing the hero. Another significant moment is when a character attempts to murder her

boyfriend's mistress. As awful as the purge is, it does allow people to exercise violence in a situation that they feel necessitates it. Of course, a better option would be to find a healthier outlet to vent frustration. This sort of crime is what the New Founding Fathers of America envisioned exercising and, hence, purging from society during the other 364 days of the year. Another significant moment in this movie is an auction among extremely wealthy people for relatively poor citizens. The auction aims to provide bidders with humans to hunt in more controlled environments during the purge. The lower socio-economic citizens submitting themselves to the auction do so in exchange for a cut of what they sell to go to their remaining families. The amount is around the beginning of generational wealth and, therefore, significant. The movie's example is a terminally ill man submitting himself to the process in the hope that his death helps his family, providing a context for people who could be more likely to take advantage of such an offer.

The next movie in the franchise, *Purge: Election Year* (2016), follows a senator running for president in opposition to the New Founding Fathers of America in 2040. The candidate has pledged to end the purge if she gets elected. Up to this point, the New Founding Fathers of America have declared immunity on all elected officials, which has been mostly successful. With the rising popularity of the senator, the reigning party announced publically that exemption from the purge on elected officials no longer exists. At this point, the paramilitary forces aim to kill the senator and eliminate the one person who could use governmental power to halt the annual purge. The senator, heavily protected by security, knows that there will probably be attempts on her life and has thoroughly vetted her security. Naturally, the political opposition buys off some of the

upper levels of the security team. The senator and her remaining protection escape a combined assault from the paramilitary forces and her former security. She escapes a few different times, ultimately making it to the end of the purge and winning the election in a landslide. On the opposite side, people who want to get rid of the purge plan their assassination of the New Founding Fathers of America's presidential candidate. The interaction of two groups planning to take advantage of the purge to further their agenda showcases the potential for violence the purge provides. Without it, assassinations would feel far-fetched, especially since murder is illegal. Another thing this movie introduces is foreigners flooding into the country for the purge and to participate in the violence. This plot point aims to show that a beacon of violence will attract violent people. Additionally, after the senator's election, there were nationwide riots in protest to the impending suspension of the purge, showing that although the silent majority prefer a purge-less America, many are extremely loud about keeping the purge intact.

*The Purge: Election Year's* (2016) most significant legacy is the film's tagline, "Keep America Great." At the time, the tagline was a jab at Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again." The tagline also begs the question of the purge universe of what exactly is great about America. In the purge universe, people die constantly, and America legally sanctions it. At the very least, it provokes conversation among audiences about what does or could make America great. America has a complicated history with heroic episodes, such as helping to win both World Wars, but it also has oppressive and cruel episodes, such as slavery and its persistent evolution that extends even to today. At any rate, the line's legacy continues to Donald Trump's reelection campaign in 2020, when his campaign slogan was "Keep America Great." The question that the slogan could ask

then had Donald Trump's answer: him. He was the reason why America was great.

Trump's answer provides a rabbit hole: What other widespread, mistaken beliefs about American greatness do Americans hold? This is a question that the fifth purge movie seeks to answer.

In *The Forever Purge* (2021), the story picks up eight years after *The Purge: Election Year* (2016) when the New Founding Fathers of America have regained control of the government, reinstated the purge, and beliefs of racial supremacy have become increasingly popular. The story follows a young migrant couple who crossed the Texas-Mexico border to escape a drug cartel. In 2049, the couple seals themselves in a compound with other migrant workers to protect themselves during the purge. During the purge, they meet a Purge Purification Force that announces its intention to purify America of non-Americans and non-white Americans. The night passes without incident, and the group goes to work the following day. Then, the Purge Purification Force appears in force and attacks the migrant community without the purge's immunity. This occurrence happens in variations nationwide, and the government falls and is ineffective in containing the purgers that fill the streets. Canada and Mexico decided to open their borders for six hours to allow innocents to leave the country. The young couple races across Texas, fights through El Paso, and a local Native American tribe smuggles the group out of the country. This all occurs as the New Founding Fathers of America declare martial law, which still fails to contain the nationwide melee, and ultimately decides to disband after receiving international blame for perpetuating crime and violence.

*The Forever Purge* (2021) concludes that what happens to a society that depends on criminal immunity to maintain its happiness as a nation is a complete governmental

failure. The film has several interesting parallels. The first is The Civil War. Although the context is significantly different, both The Civil War and America in *The Purge* series split over an issue that two opposing sides could not reconcile. Additionally, both feature innate self-exaltation over others, primarily concerning racial supremacy. Racial supremacy existed in The Civil War, and it also plays a massive role in *The Purge* movies as the most identifiable factor separating one person from another. There are also specific similar justifications given by the Confederacy in defense of slavery and again by the New Founding Fathers of America in defense of the purge: America's culture and economy depended on both (Mintz). In the case of the Civil War, it indeed propped up the economy, at least until the Industrial Revolution, at which point some became abolitionists because they believed slavery was impeding economy growth from the Industrial Revolution (Mintz). Whether or not slavery was impeding the American economy is uncertain. However, even those abolitionists who were abolitionists primarily for this reason justify one group of people over another based on a few signaling characteristics, just like the New Founding Fathers of America and those who opposed abolition. All three groups valued money and used that justification to defend their beliefs that ultimately oppressed entire socio-economic classes and still do in the United States in different ways. The most natural question following this justification is whether the ends justify the means. However, the problem with this question is that it brings the issue to a head. It brought the United States to war as those favoring equal rights decided to act on what was wrong. In *The Purge* franchise, this happens until it is reversed when The New Founding Fathers of America return to power as America became addicted to racial violence with the purge as its primary outlet. Although the Civil War has a much more

satisfying ending than *The Forever Purge* (2021), they are narratives that revolve around the same contentions: race, and have the same implications: war.

The Purge movies and TV show feature violence for what is ultimately the sake of systematically reducing the population of socioeconomic classes. Although violence is extreme in the world of the purge, its moderation can still show up in regular, everyday activities such as competitive sports. For the sake of this example, violence can extend to any physical contact that is adversely painful to any degree or results in injury. American football and basketball, arguably the two most popular sports in America, can feature gruesome injuries in violent sports, football more than basketball, where athletes will destroy parts of their bodies to win. Some particularly gruesome examples are Gordon Hayward in 2017 and Damar Hamlin in 2022. In 2017, Gordon Hayward was playing for the Boston Celtics and attempted to catch a pass in the paint (“Gordon Hayward fractures left ankle in 1st quarter of Celtics vs. Cavaliers | SportsCenter | ESPN”). He landed wrong on his leg, and it twisted in a direction that indicated an injury, and it looked awful enough that other players, including those on the other team, knelt and began to pray (“Gordon Hayward fractures left ankle in 1st quarter of Celtics vs. Cavaliers | SportsCenter | ESPN”). In 2022, Damar Hamlin played for the Buffalo Bills and made a routine tackle on a tight end (“Damar Hamlin goes into CARDIAC ARREST full sequence”). He got up and then immediately collapsed and went into cardiac arrest (“Damar Hamlin goes into CARDIAC ARREST full sequence”). Trainers and medical professionals resuscitated him, and he lived through the ordeal (“Damar Hamlin goes into CARDIAC ARREST full sequence”). However, as he lay on the field oscillating between life and death, players from both teams also knelt and began to pray (“Damar Hamlin

goes into CARDIAC ARREST full sequence”). The violence in both of the incidences were very minimal, especially for the standard of both sports, but the resulting injuries speak more about human mortality and its delicacy. If people can almost die from a regulated level of violence in a game that is fun and for entertainment, unregulated violence between humans can easily take advantage of fragile human mortality. *The Purge* illustrates this and takes it to its most logical extreme.

Media, especially American media, is progressively becoming violent on levels characterized by *The Purge* franchise. Beyond movies, however, are videogames that depict graphically violent actions. The main difference between violent videogames and violent movies is that the player in video games makes the decision, even in a digital world, to be violent, but people only observe violent actions in movies and do not take an active role in deciding to commit them. A relatively recent videogame, *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013), encourages the player to take the opportunity to murder and steal with virtually no limits. Since its release, *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013) has operated on four major consoles: the PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PlayStation 5, and Xbox Series X. The PlayStation 4 and Xbox One have existed since 2013 and have sold roughly 117.2 million and 58.5 million units, respectively (Kearns). The PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X have existed since 2020 and have sold approximately 15.2 million and 11.37 million units, respectfully (D’Angelo). Since its release in 2013, *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013) has sold over 190 million units (Clement). In total, roughly 93.9% of all people who have purchased one of these four consoles have also bought *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013). However, this number ignores the brief life the game had on the Xbox 360 and the PlayStation 3, and it is playable on a PC, but far fewer people play on a PC than on a

console. However, the three combined do not add significantly to the total of available gaming systems that can run the game because PCs can do significantly more, and the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 quickly became obsolete after the game's release. In short, the seemingly large number of people who purchased this game have, for any number of reasons, overlooked violence and gore in a game that resembles the same disregard for social norms and laws as *The Purge* franchise.

Ultimately, *The Purge* franchise serves as a harrowing statement about human nature, our tendency for opportunistic violence, and our tendency to mistrust or even dislike others. The characters of *The Purge* franchise are variables that could be anybody, which is what makes it so frightening. It also is a statement to its viewers to be cognizant of how they treat people and think of others. All human life has equal value, and to suggest otherwise creates the potential for a world like *The Purge* franchise.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### The Joker

Without question, the Joker is one of the most iconic characters ever to grace American pop culture. However, unlike many of its contemporaries, the character has something of an edge in the form of a madness that enamors Batman faithful to significantly enjoy the role the Joker plays in Batman's life and the larger universe of DC Comics. Since the turn of the 21st century, there have been three major movie projects featuring three different iterations of the Joker: *The Dark Knight* (2008), *Suicide Squad* (2016), and *The Joker* (2019). At any rate, there was a cultural significance in society's reaction to the world, its focus, and its attitude around the release of *The Dark Knight* (2008) and *The Joker* (2019) when the scripts were in production. Parts of society took on the Joker as a character who was easy to identify with because the Joker understood their anger and rage towards the societal institutions that had failed them in specific events. This phenomenon happened twice: once around 2008 when *The Dark Knight* (2008) debuted and again in 2019 when *The Joker* (2019) premiered.

#### *The Dark Knight* (2008)

*"I'm not a monster. I'm just ahead of the curve."*

There are numerous parallels between the movie's events and real-world events leading up to the creation of *The Dark Knight* (2008). The most obvious event was 9/11, with attacks on society and its infrastructure in a very public and terrifying manner. The terror created by an initially unknown and mysterious enemy is analogous to the Joker's relationship with pushing terror onto the citizens of Gotham. Previous and more bland

iterations of the Joker focus on just his relationship with Batman and making his life as miserable as possible, but *The Dark Knight* (2008) takes the public in the aggregate into account and shows the fear that terrorism can inflict on a public psyche.

Heath Ledger's Joker has a complex ideology. As the movie opens with the Joker executing a seamless plan to rob a bank while systematically eliminating the people he hired, his ideology seems like that of a basic supervillain: acquiring wealth through stealing and killing. The Joker doubles down on this ideology when he meets Gotham's organized crime ring while they meet in broad daylight and scheme to protect their wealth from Batman. He says he is willing to take care of Batman but wants to be paid, which is standard for the average supervillain.

From this point, the Joker starts to set himself apart from anything stereotypical. He releases a video saying he will begin killing people every day Batman does not turn himself in. The Joker then begins to systematically eliminate or attempt to eliminate people in powerful positions that are making life difficult for organized crime, including the police commissioner, a judge overseeing a case against the entirety of organized crime, the district attorney, and the mayor. Each attempt is increasingly public, spreading panic among the citizens of Gotham. Finally, with Gotham at a breaking point, the district attorney, Harvey Dent, lies and reveals that he is Batman, but Batman shows up to fight the Joker when he tries to kill the district attorney with the help of the eventual new police commissioner, Jim Gordon. Batman captures the Joker, and the two are face-to-face for the first time. The Joker starts to reveal his obsession: that he is Batman's counterpart and wants to see Batman embrace madness and kill others. The significance of this is twofold. First, he wants to knock Batman off his moral high ground by revealing

that Batman is just as violent as the dregs of Gotham. The second is that the Joker has no intention of killing Batman because his plan is an exceedingly difficult and complex way to do so, and the Joker will say later that he will never kill Batman because he is “just too much fun.”

The movie makes a significant shift at this point as the Joker focuses less on revealing moral ambiguity within Batman to moral ambiguity within the larger population of Gotham. It starts when the Joker escapes police custody through a surgically implanted bomb within one of his underlings and sends Batman and most of the police presence after the district attorney and his girlfriend, who are separated and attached to large oil drums rigged to explode. At this point, the district attorney burns off half his face while listening to his girlfriend die. To this point in the movie, most of the movie’s significant characters view Dent as the white knight of Gotham or the best the city has to offer. The district attorney is injured and hospitalized. As if things could not become more chaotic, a whistleblower goes public with the information that he knows who Batman is and will reveal it on a local talk show at the end of the day. The Joker announces to Gotham that he will destroy a hospital if the whistleblower is not dead within one hour. This promise prompts even further mass panic among the public.

The public attempts to kill the whistleblower, but the police and Batman protect him while the Joker continues his plans to destroy a hospital. Before this happens, Jim Gordon visits the hospitalized Harvey Dent and reveals that he will not accept skin grafts and very much blames Gordon for his situation, getting him to admit to the nickname his unit had for him: Two-Face. After the Joker threatens the hospitals, he speaks with Two-Face, who is less than thrilled to see him initially. During their conversation, the Joker

reveals that society's rules are hypocritical and ultimately hold it back. He explains that if a truck full of soldiers were to die, society would not blink because it is part of the plan, but when he threatens a mayor, nobody can accept that outcome because it is not part of the plan. In light of this, the Joker proves that society will throw rules and decency to the wind when things get uncomfortable and uncontrollable. He says, "When the chips are down, these civilized people, they'll eat each other," showing that the rules of society are hanging by a thread attached to the illusion of control. Two-Face tells the Joker that chance is impartial and supported by chaos or luck, deciding to flip a coin to determine if he shoots the Joker. He leaves the Joker alive, who destroys a hospital, while Two-Face takes a revenge tour on corrupted police and mafia bosses responsible for kidnapping him and killing his girlfriend, flipping a coin to decide each of their fates. As this happens, the Joker announces to Gotham that it is now a city without rules, saying that anybody who does not want to participate has until midnight to get out, but implies that he has rigged all the bridges and tunnels out of the city to explode. The only remaining option to leave the city safely is the two massive ferries, and city officials decide to use one for inmates and one for a group of civilians. The Joker had rigged bombs to both ferries and given the switches to the other boats. He announced to both that they had until midnight to decide to destroy the other boat, or he would destroy both. Midnight came and went; Batman found the Joker with the help of a highly intrusive and illegal device with access to all information that all cell phones in the city pick up, audio and visual. Batman then captured and immobilized the Joker, and they watched as neither boat exploded, meaning that the inhabitants of neither boat decided to attempt to keep themselves safe. After this, Batman responds to Two-Face, still on his revenge tour, who has kidnapped the family of

Jim Gordon, blaming him for his disfigurement and his significant other's death because he kept two cops on his team that Two-Face had warned Gordon- the same two who kidnapped him and his significant other. Two-Face falls to his death in the confrontation after mistaking who the enemy was of peace within the city. At this point, to keep the work Two-Face had done to imprison most of the organized crime intact, Batman sacrifices his name, getting Gordon to radio that Batman had killed Harvey Dent and taken his family hostage so that the district attorney's name can remain clean and keep all the work he did against organized crime intact.

As the public watched planes slam into buildings in a coordinated attack on 9/11, the public began to think about its safety and take what they believed were practical steps to protect themselves. This included national laws and policies, such as the Patriot Act, and individual actions, such as attacks on minorities, especially those who wear turbans or look Middle Eastern, which includes Muslims, who may have been wearing turbans at the time. For reference, hate crimes in 2000 against Muslims were less than fifty, but that number ballooned to more than four-hundred and fifty after 9/11 (Human Rights Watch Staff, 17). In the story of *The Dark Knight*, Batman's friend Lucius Fox objects to the existence of the telecommunications project Batman wants to use to find the Joker. Although it works and helps Batman during the final confrontation by protecting hostages who would have otherwise been in more danger, Fox destroys the machine, deeply concerned with protecting private information. The use of the project is a commentary, intentional or not, on the Patriot Act's effectiveness and moral ambiguity in combating terrorism. Continuing with the metaphor, one could argue that such a device was not necessary as the two boats did not harm each other, proving that the best way to combat

terror is for individual people to refuse to give into fear. However, the unnerving part of the metaphor is that the machine effectively protected Gotham despite the numerous objections to its morality.

Switching back to the immediate aftermath of 9/11 and the attacks on minorities, people made those choices under a misguided logic to protect themselves by being proactively violent. An example is that many of the people subject to attack in the United States were not of the Islamic religion but instead of the Sikh religion. The Sikh Coalition in the United States reported that post 9/11, hate crimes against turbaned Sikhs rose nearly ten percent across the Bay Area, where a large number of Sikhs live (The Sikh Coalition Staff). In other words, those hate crimes in response to 9/11 were not only morally wrong but did not even attack the group many blamed. This shows the actual danger of responding to terror: people tend to make irrational and emotional decisions based on preconceived notions and stereotypes, which can have an extremely high probability of not being true. In other words, racism and preconceived notions operate in the broadest and most illogical ways. This is also not to mention that many committed these acts as revenge, but such attempts at vengeance were also foolhardy and misguided. *The Dark Knight's* Joker addresses this as well. When Two-Face takes Jim Gordon's family hostage at the end of the movie, he blames Gordon for putting his girlfriend in danger by keeping cops around who kidnapped him and his girlfriend, resulting in his disfigurement and her death. His action at the end is also commentary, either intentional or not, on acts committed in the name of revenge after 9/11. Those who committed hate crimes blamed the whole group for the actions of a few extremists that fell within that group, failing to help the situation or to attain any measure of revenge.

Overall, Heath Ledger's Joker is a commentary on which parts of America's response to 9/11 and other terrorist attacks were healthy and sound and which were unhealthy and heinous. The comparison and commentary are not one-to-one, but many themes are the same, suggesting a deep inspiration from 9/11, especially on the public's reaction to developing the Joker for how a real-world iteration could look.

### *The Joker (2019)*

*"You decide what's right or wrong the same way you decide what's funny or not."*

*The Joker (2019)* has a different tone than *The Dark Knight (2008)*. The simplest explanation is that *The Joker (2019)* is a Joker movie, and *The Dark Knight (2008)* is a Batman movie, but the emphasis on the iconic villain is the same. However, everything surrounding the Joker shifts dramatically. The film presents its events in a fractured light tinted with anger, leaving the audience asking what did not happen as much as what did. More importantly, the movie is designed to mislead its audience intentionally and cast doubt on the reliability of its storytelling to showcase the Joker's fractured mind.

*The Joker (2019)* starts somberly, with a group of schoolboys jumping and attacking a party clown in a dark alleyway, leaving him bleeding and bruised. This opening scene shows that this movie will not be kind and that we are watching society and events outside the protagonist's control shove the protagonist, Arthur Fleck, into madness. From the alleyway, the film unfolds into what might be the worst possible series of events for anyone. Arthur is fired from his job for bringing a firearm into a children's hospital and then uses the same gun to murder three white-collar employees on the subway. This firearm was a gift from a coworker, Gary, the week prior, and the coworker subsequently told their boss that Arthur had begged him to sell. Shortly after,

Thomas Wayne, the employer of the men killed, openly takes the side of those killed, and Arthur's mother, Penny, talks about how she hopes they find the person responsible for the murders. Penny also establishes in this scene that she is obsessed with Thomas Wayne and is trying to get in touch with him. At this point, Arthur goes to his therapist and says all he has are negative thoughts, and his therapist informs him that the city is slashing budgets and that he will not be able to get refills for his medications. During all this, Arthur is trying to become a stand-up comedian and gets on stage at a local comedy club, which seems marvelous for him as he perceives a dazzled audience. His perception could not be further from the truth, as his favorite program with Murray Franklin, his hero, makes fun of a video of his attempt.

Arthur finds a letter written by his mother addressed to Thomas Wayne that states that Arthur is their child. He confronts his mother, who gives very few details, and soon suffers a stroke. Arthur, keen to meet his father, goes to Wayne Manor, meets a young Bruce Wayne, and interacts with him in a very creepy way before he meets Alfred. Arthur tells Alfred his story, who replies, "You're HER son?!" Arthur then goes and visits his mother in the hospital and meets two detectives who want to question him about the subway murders. He says that his employer did not fire him for having a gun but for not being funny. Shortly after his visit, Arthur confronts Thomas Wayne in a bathroom, who tells him that a mentally insane Penny Fleck adopted him and then punches him. Looking to verify, Arthur steals his mother's file from a psych ward and finds definitive proof that he was adopted and that he and his mother lived with her abusive boyfriend before his mother was admitted to the psychiatric facility. The Joker is born as Arthur crosses the threshold into madness.

However, Arthur's descent into madness is not purely based on these events. From the movie's beginning, Arthur starts on some level of insanity as he has insomnia and a laughing condition. He is also on seven different medications, smokes constantly, stares into space continually, and drinks large amounts of alcohol throughout the movie, all while trying to be happy the way his mother would like him to be. He also exhibits strange and dangerous tendencies, such as imagining a relationship with a neighbor who lives down the hall, crawling into a refrigerator and shutting the door, and dancing in a robotic, painful way in odd situations. Arthur is also not strictly a good person before he crosses the threshold into madness. He stalks that same neighbor and her child, brings a gun into a children's hospital, kills three people, two in self-defense and one in cold blood, scarily interacts with Bruce Wayne, chokes Alfred during their conversation, lies to detectives, sneaks into a benefit to confront Thomas Wayne, steals his mother's file, and trespasses into the same neighbor's apartment, with whom he has no prior relationship.

Another thing that Arthur does is imagine reality. He has a lengthy fantasy of being on Murray Franklin's show that he makes up and a similar fantasy of having a great set at a comedy club. He also imagines an entire relationship with a woman who lives down the hall from him and imagines her at the comedy club and in the hospital with his mother. The existence of things like these that only happened in Arthur's mind casts doubt on the validity of every other scene in the movie, given his tendency for unreliable narration.

Additionally, in the interview with Thomas Wayne, responding to the deaths of his three employees, he says, "Those of us who have made something of our lives will look

at those that haven't as nothing but clowns." From this point, Gotham reacts, and people protest, often in clown masks and costumes. This happens in the background of Arthur's story, but clown masks pop up occasionally during his descent to madness as if to suggest that the world and society identify with him, which makes sense, given that Arthur accidentally started the movement with his actions on the subway.

The movie is also very vague about whose version of events is correct between Penny Fleck and Thomas Wayne. The adoption papers in the psychiatric facility and the record that one of Penny's boyfriends abused Penny and Arthur show that the version of events that Penny feeds Arthur is questionable at best. However, Penny also states that Thomas Wayne had the adoption papers forged, but she is just as unreliable as her son and could be delusional. However, Arthur finds a picture of his mother with a note on the back that reads, "You're so pretty. – TW." TW would stand for Thomas Wayne, meaning he and Penny had some nonprofessional, romantic relationship. However, this could just as easily be something Penny invented to feed her delusions. The movie is deliberately vague here to arouse sympathy for Arthur from the audience.

With this in mind, when Arthur crosses the threshold into madness, he is confronted with several truths and commits a truly heinous act. Talking to his neighbor forces him to face the fact that he made up the relationship with his neighbor. Shortly before that, however, he visits his mother in the hospital again and suffocates her out of anger for what she did to put him in this situation. While he kills his mother, he states that his laugh is not a flaw, that it is the real him, and that his life is not a tragedy but a comedy. This understanding of his life plays a monumental role in how Arthur interacts with his environment. Amid these, the show *Live! With Murray Franklin* booked him to

come and talk to Murray because the reception to the video of him in the comedy club was so positive from the audience.

The day after he kills his mother, he prepares himself to appear on Murray's show. He undergoes a stark physical transformation, including dyeing his hair green, putting on copious amounts of clown makeup in front of a mirror with the photo of his mother and Thomas Wayne's note propped against it, and donning a bright red and yellow suit. Two of his former coworkers visited him during this transformation to check-in. Arthur kills Gary, the one who gifted him the gun, with scissors and lets the other run free. He also dances more confidently and expressively during the montage of him dressing as a clown for his TV appearance than at any other time in the movie. After he leaves his home, still dancing, the same detectives chase him, and he loses them on a subway. Coincidentally, on the same day as his interview, there is a protest at city hall where the protestors are wearing clown masks, and many of the protestors are already dressed like Arthur on the subway. The protestors mob the detectives and beat them close to death.

He arrives on set, previously having decided to commit suicide on live TV in a scene where he does not know what he wants to do with this opportunity. However, Murray and his producer enter the dressing room. Three important things happened during this conversation. The first is that Arthur convinces both men that his appearance is not a political statement. The second is that Murray, hungry for this interview's attention, decides to let him on the air. The third is that Arthur asks Murray to introduce him as Joker. Before he goes onstage, he dances again very slowly and creepily backstage, almost priming himself for the occasion. He enters with several spins and immediately kisses another guest before sitting down. Murray comments that his appearance is not political,

and Arthur responds that he just wants to make the world laugh. Murray naturally asks for a joke. After spending an awkward amount of time thumbing through his journal, he gives a knock-knock joke about police informing a mother that a drunk driver killed her son. Murray tells him off for this. Then, things begin to get heated. In an Oscar-worthy back-and-forth exchange, the Joker confesses on live TV that he killed the men in the subway, not to start a movement, but because they were awful. Murray then gets him to discuss his issue with the fuss over the three men, stating, “Yes, I do. Have you seen what it’s like out there, Murray? Do you ever actually leave the studio? Everybody just yells and screams at each other. Nobody’s civil anymore! Nobody thinks what it’s like to be the other guy!” He then states that powerful men like Thomas Wayne certainly do not think about the other guy, and nobody would care if it was him on the street. Murray calls out the self-pity in Joker’s statement, who replies that Murray is awful for showing his video at the comedy club and making fun of him. Murray explains that his actions have caused riots outside at that very second and that people are dying. The Joker responds with a simple, “I know! How about another joke, Murray?... What do you get... when you cross a mentally ill loner with a society that abandons him and treats him like trash!?...I’ll tell you what you get! You get what you [expletive] deserve!” Joker then shoots Murray, killing him.

After Joker is arrested, rioters, emboldened by his confession and actions with Murray, attack the squad car and free him. They place him on the hood, where he dances amongst his adoring fans, forcing his face into a smile while imagining now orphaned Bruce Wayne standing over his dead parents in an alley. The scene cuts and Joker is in a psych ward talking to a psychologist, who he presumably murders, and runs down a hall with bloody footprints as the movie ends.

Drawing a parallel between *The Joker* (2019) and society is not quite as evident in *The Dark Knight* (2008) simply because there is not one event that inspired it. However, there is a time that parallels the movie's events: 2016, around the time the script for *The Joker* (2019) would have been in progress. In 2016, there was much turmoil, much of which had to do with the Presidential election, but there was also a decent amount that had no observable link to anything else occurring in society—much of the turmoil in 2016 links back to *The Joker* (2019) in many similar ways.

In terms of the election, both candidates had their fair share of sound bites that were awful. A minor plot point in *The Joker* is that Thomas Wayne is running for mayor, and he has a soundbite where he says, "What kind of coward would do something that coldblooded? Someone who hides behind a mask. Someone envious of those more fortunate than themselves... those of us who've made something of our lives will always look at those who haven't, as nothing but clowns." This soundbite masterfully captures Donald Trump's position and one of Hillary Clinton's more notorious soundbites. Clinton says, "You know, to just be grossly generalistic, you could put half of Trump's supporters into what I call the basket of deplorables. Right?" (Reilly). Her comment follows the same logic as Wayne's: both resort to name-calling a portion of the population that they find distasteful and less than others. Clinton generalizes Trump's supporters as racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, and Islamophobic, which belong in the "basket of deplorables." This comment is remarkably close to Wayne's generalization of calling those who have not made anything of themselves clowns. It is not an exact parallel, but both are gross overgeneralizations that light a fire under their opposition. Moreover, the first half of Wayne's comment captures

Trump's attitude that people different from themselves envy those who seem to have it better. Clinton, in the same address, acknowledges this herself when she says that Trump's supporters "feel that the government has let them down" and are "desperate for a change" (Reilly). In short, Clinton and Trump are implying that they are angry and complaining that systems have universally failed them instead of refusing to acknowledge that personal decisions played a role in differences. This is ridiculous as Trump inherited much of his fortune, and Clinton grew up middle class; both positions are far more privileged than many others.

Expanding upon the parallel, Wayne's comments drive the citizens of Gotham to protest and then riot in the street. This is eerily similar to the presidential election, as after Trump won, there were riots in the streets of several major cities, including Portland, Los Angeles, Denver, Minneapolis, Baltimore, Dallas, and Oakland (Ansari). However, Wayne's comments are extracted from both sides of the election, as if to suggest that either way, riots would occur regardless of who won the election. Another parallel is that Wayne's comments of calling a large section of society "clowns" inspired the protesters and rioters to dress up as clowns, entirely unrelated to who Joker is, and that he happened to be a party clown at the beginning of the movie. This detail is another callback to 2016, when there were several instances of people dressed as clowns committing heinous and evil acts on people (Poole). At this point, Joker transcended his role as Batman's archrival and became a societal symbol for chaos and mistrusting or even hating the established institutions of power.

Another way the clowns in 2016 and *The Joker* (2019) run parallel is that any reasonable person would look out and promptly conclude that the world had, finally, gone insane. However, that is only a piece of the explanation. Much of *The Joker* (2019) centers around the mental health and sanity of Arthur Fleck, and that aspect of Joker provides a platform to talk about the mental health of society and its individuals as a component of many of the story's events. In recent years, the rate of mental illness has increased, up thirteen percent in some areas of the world (World Health Organization Staff). Rather than pointing at the fact that rates have gone up as definitive proof that society has become more mentally ill and unstable, I would like to suggest a different explanation. Mentally, society has always been this sick, but only in recent years has there been an effort to get people the help they need. Keeping in mind that there is a natural inflation of rates due to some people falsely self-diagnosing, there was no significant shift in society's mental health, but increasing public awareness of how sick it is. Forbes reports that two-hundred million workdays and \$3.7 billion are lost annually in America due to a shortage of mental health services (Patel). There are two possible explanations for this. The first is that people refuse to get help, which only makes partial sense as mental health is generally becoming less stigmatized. The other explanation is that the lack of resources is the primary driver behind so many spiking problems in mental health as people swarm institutions not equipped to handle this kind of volume. This creates a more significant socio-economic divide as the rich can pay for better access to help, and the poor cannot and are at the mercy of government programs for help, as Arthur is at the beginning of the movie. The most significant implication of this

occurrence, however, is that suicide rates have also skyrocketed, which should have remained unchanged if there were no new additional illnesses, as the suicide rate has risen by thirty-three percent in recent years (Farzana and Corr). Regardless of whether mental illness has increased, if just the awareness has, or some self-feeding loop of the two is the case, the sociological implications remain the same.

The main implication is one Karl Marx outlines in *The Communist Manifesto*, that when the proletariat becomes increasingly oppressed and the divide between proletariat and bourgeoisie increases, the proletariat will rebel (Engels and Marx). This implication plays itself out in the film's final minutes. Gotham's working class, sick of being looked down upon, rioted in the streets and voiced their displeasure. This is not to say that the proper answer to fix society, according to *The Joker*, is to follow the rest of Marx's ideas, but that the movie and the character represent many individuals in society as being looked down upon and society finally rising against its oppressor.

Part of the reason that *The Joker* (2019) is, in many ways, a more complicated movie than *The Dark Knight* (2008) is that society is always more complex than people think. In 2005 and 2006, when *The Dark Knight* (2008) script was in production, the views on society were much different than they were a decade later when *The Joker* script was in production. This fact provides at least a partial explanation as to why society identified with Joker in 2008 and then again in 2019 because he represents the darkest and most problematic corners of society that seemingly no policy can fix, but maybe an idea like hope could.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Omni-Man

*“We can finally do what we were meant to do. Be who we were meant to be.”*

Omni-Man is a lesser-known villain in the media, but he is probably one of the more exciting and violent characters in recent years. Omni-Man is the father of Invincible, the protagonist of the comic series *Invincible*, which debuted in 2003. *Invincible* was more of a niche comic book, as it was published by Image Comics, the third largest publisher after Marvel and DC Comics. *Invincible* got much more exposure in 2021 when Amazon Prime released an eight-episode animated series that chronicles roughly the first twenty issues. The story in the series features Invincible growing as a hero under the tutelage of Omni-Man before discovering the nasty things that Omni-Man has done. The artistic style exhibits a highly elevated level of violence and gore. Ultimately, Omni-Man’s story shows that evil can masquerade as good and that, sometimes, the best way to communicate a villain’s power is through a gory visual style.

Omni-Man is a viltrumite, a race of aliens from Viltrum that fight each other to the death to make the entire race stronger through a sped-up process of natural selection. This grants viltrumites the standard array of superhuman powers: flying, speed, strength, invulnerability, and immortality. The first four on this list function like muscles because the more a viltrumite work them, the more effectively it can use them. The last on the list is a trait. The older a viltrumite gets, the slower it ages. Imagine a function graphed on an XY plane, and as a limit approaches a specific number, it never actually reaches that number. If viltrumite aging functions like this, calculus limits prove they are immortal. Beyond the typical skill set for a viltrumite, Omni-Man displays a tactical mind with a

long history of work in the viltrumite military. All of these abilities portray a powerful individual among powerful individuals. Perhaps his most terrifying power is that he shows, at times, to have zero reservations about killing. He says at one point that humanity is like a pet to viltrumites simply because of the difference in life spans. Overall, his abilities set the stage for a trusted superhero to cause maximum harm to beings far less powerful than him.

At the beginning of the series, Invincible gets his powers and begins to receive training from Omni-Man. The story establishes Omni-Man as the most powerful superhero on an Earth loaded with a roster of superheroes, including a team called The Guardians of the Globe. The episode is slow-going yet captivating, relatively clean, with little swearing, as if preparing the audience for an excellent coming-of-age superhero story. This could not be further from the truth. The episode cuts and shows “written by Robert Kirkman” and then cuts back to the episode as if to show subtext. In reality, the opposite is true. The last part of the episode has the Guardians of the Globe assembling at their headquarters. After they all arrive, Omni-Man flies out of the shadows and tries to punch one of the members, but he misses. They freeze for a moment and then start to fight. One by one, Omni-Man kills the Guardians of the Globe. He crushes the skull of one, punches through the face of another, pulls one’s face off, uses a mace to flatten yet another, twists one’s head one-hundred and eighty degrees, and then decapitates one by slashing his hand. The gore is extreme, and it is the first time that the tone and level of gore shift to the standard for the rest of the series. The violence is also unnerving because how Omni-Man killed the Guardians of the Globe is impossible. For example, no human can decapitate another human using their bare hand. The logic behind the physics is

comical and unnerving. His actions go unexplained at the end of the first episode, building suspense for the rest of the season.

The rest of the series features several adventures that Invincible goes on and even more subplots. However, they all pale compared to watching Omni-Man continue to engage with the world as a hero. There is a scene where he speaks at the public and private funerals for The Guardians of the Globe. Given that he committed the murders and is the epitome of evil masquerading as good. This creates a dramatic irony as the audience waits for the rest of the characters to catch up to the truth of how The Guardians of the Globe died. When Cecil Stedman, the leader of the Global Defense Agency, figures out that Omni-Man is the one who committed the murders, he stalls for time- doing his utmost to make Omni-Man believe that his lies have been successful and that people have bought them. Stedman's ploy is to find a way to defeat Omni-Man before he confronts him because he does not believe that there is anything or anyone that can go one-on-one against Omni-Man and have a prayer to win. This caution comes with good reason. One of the more terrifying displays of Omni-Man's power is when he flies into a portal while chasing after a group of aliens bent on conquering Earth. Once through the portal, he is against an entire race of aliens fighting to keep their race alive. Over six months, Omni-Man kills every member of the alien race, mercifully killing the last handful after they open another portal to send him home. Thus, Stedman believes Earth's best chance comes down to Invincible fighting Omni-Man with any help he can give him, and he notes that this may not even be enough. However, the hang-up is that Invincible is a relatively new superhero, and Stedman has no idea where his loyalties lie as he is either with Earth and humanity or with his father. Eventually, the confrontation is forced on Stedman when

Invincible watches his father fight and kill a revived member of The Guardians of the Globe after Omni-Man leaves home after his wife, Invincible's mother, confronts him about his crimes. Invincible comes to Omni-Man's help and asks the obvious question after the melee and watching Omni-Man kill: Why?

Omni-Man explains to Invincible that their vitrumite heritage is set on sharing their culture and advances with the rest of the galaxy, even if it is by force, and he is on Earth to prepare it for takeover. He then reveals that humans are fragile and not much more than pets in his eyes. During this conversation, Invincible realizes that his father's explanation includes his killing The Guardians of the Globe. This realization results in an ideological struggle between his viltrumite heritage of universal domination and his human legacy of valuing life. The setup between Omni-Man and Invincible is similar to the one between Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader, but there is a crucial difference. Omni-Man, the father, is the unquestioned winner of their brawl, and he wins in such a spectacular manner as he seeks to show Invincible why siding with Viltrum is siding with Earth in the long run. Highlights from the fight include holding Invincible out by the back of his neck toward a moving subway in possibly the most bloody scene of the series. Omni-Man splits the subway in half with Invincible's face to prove humanity's inherent weakness and fragility. Also disturbing in the fight is Invincible saving a fighter jet pilot who ejected from his plane. Omni-Man then kills the defenseless pilot simply because he can. The battle continues until Omni-Man drags Invincible to the top of a snow-capped mountain and then beats him as Invincible becomes increasingly close to death. Then, Omni-Man asks two rhetorical questions: "Why do you continue to resist? Who will you have in a thousand years after you outlive all of your friends?" With tears in his

blackened eyes, Invincible answers that he will have his father. Omni-Man then has a flashback of Invincible playing little league baseball and his wife explaining that struggle and learning are beautiful and that their son is an extension of them whom they want to protect and foster as much as possible. Omni-Man, also in tears, leaves the solar system and Invincible alive.

Despite being bent on conquering Earth, Omni-Man refuses to kill its last line of defense because he cannot reconcile his sense of duty to Viltrum with his affection and pride in his son. This brings the idea back to the ideological struggle within Omni-Man. His fight with Invincible helps show that he is not the same individual who first came to Earth and that the ideas he has lived amongst, human thoughts, have a certain beauty that has value beyond the goal of attaining perfection. In essence, both ideological stances are Omni-Man appealing to a higher purpose, and, in this way, the foundations of his competing interests are similar.

The two possible ideologies for Omni-Man that stem from his single motivation offer him two choices. The first ideology is that the strong and perfect dominate the rest of society simply because they are inherently better. An extreme extension of this is the foundation of Viltrum's society. Omni-Man is an essential part of the machine that seeks to extend the greatness of viltrumite culture, and the evolved strategy Viltrum employs is to send a champion to soften a society to prepare for Viltrum rule. Omni-Man's mission presents his first option: to crush all potential resistance on Earth that would disagree with the viltrumite authority. The closest real-world example to Viltrum's empire is manifest destiny in America during the nineteenth century. Americans believed that they had the superior society and had a God-given right to conquer the rest of the United

States. They did this and destroyed anything in their path, including nature and native American civilizations.

The second ideology is distinctly human: amidst human life's pain and suffering, there is beauty in the depth and joy of relationships, which Omni-Man experiences with his wife and son. This presents his second option: acknowledging that the human way of forming connections is superior to the viltrumite method of forceful domination of all other societies. The two choices and ideologies' common motivation is that they appeal to Omni-Man doing something more significant than himself. The first choice is service to the viltrumite empire, not Omni-man, and the second choice is choosing the people who care for him and using his strength to protect those in less powerful positions. His journey is a question of which opportunity he will accept.

His choice is perpendicular to Invincible's coming-of-age story. Invincible is keen to obtain his powers to grow to be a hero like he believes his father is. However, the reality is a lot more bloody than Invincible imagined. Invincible must accept that part of being a hero means putting others before oneself, and being Invincible means absorbing violence and extreme danger. His journey of understanding the heaviness of his responsibility is best shown with the title sequence of each episode. As the first season progresses, an additional splatter of blood across the Invincible logo symbolizes the carnage he will need to wade through to take responsibility for the powers he so desperately wanted. Omni-Man causes much of this carnage, which is part of what Invincible accepts at the end of the series. In short, Omni-Man's ideological struggle comes at the expense of Invincible's choice to carry the true burden of being somebody who does the right thing regardless of circumstance.

Another phenomenon that Omni-Man's story brings to light is that the masses will accept anything that looks like a guardian angel as a guardian angel. This phenomenon is highly problematic because it allows people in powerful positions to hang onto their power even when they are unworthy. In *The Republic*, Plato outlines a potential safeguard method against this problem. He posits that the utopia he describes, Kallipolis, should be ruled by a Philosopher King because they alone can distinguish universal right and wrong from a philosophical standpoint and thus uphold the utopia (Plato, 153). However, he also says this could never happen because the masses would never make a philosopher their king because they are too consumed with appearance (Plato, 154). The reason Plato's Philosopher Kings could never work is the same reason that the blind trust in authority that Omni-Man presents is such an issue. Thankfully, the situation with Omni-Man only mirrors reality. However, *Invincible* (2021), in this way, reminds its audience that people are prone to believe anything that masquerades as believable and will rush to accept any gift or prominent figure that looks generous or heroic. This is a dangerous way for a society to operate and provides a necessity for every citizen in every community to be constantly vigilant of who is leading them and what they are doing.

Research and intentional accountability are necessary for those of a higher stature than the average citizen. Some examples are present today. For example, the average American thinks more about police accountability than in previous times due to newly formed organizations presenting ideas that would better establish police accountability ("Transforming the System"). Unfortunately, there are many places where accountability and fairness are nonexistent. The best illustration of this is in *The New York Times*, which reports that ninety-seven congressional members, many of whom were re-elected, bought

and sold stock shares directly related to their congressional committees (Parlapiano et al.). In this way, an extension of Omni-Man is an exaggeration of many issues related to a lack of accountability of people in positions of power.

A couple of real-world examples of leaders devolving into tyrants and bullies in the absence of accountability are Joseph Stalin and Francisco Franco. Joseph Stalin was the leader of the Soviet Union from 1922 to 1953 (“How did Stalin rise to power?”). At that time, Stalin committed abuses of power, masquerading as selfless and necessary growth for the Soviet state. When he took power, the Soviet Union was an agrarian society that had failed to keep up with other world powers's economic growth through industrialization (“How did Stalin rise to power?”). Stalin forced Soviet citizens to migrate to cities to work in factories to boost economic power, but, despite macro results, there was also widespread famine and death of the people relocating (“How did Stalin rise to power?”). Midway through his reign, Stalin viewed anybody who questioned him or his ideas as an enemy of the state, and Stalin had them arrested, imprisoned, killed, or all three (“How did Stalin rise to power?”). His physical strength or supernatural abilities do not back Stalin’s reign of power. Still, the Soviet people’s belief in communism as an economic and political model. Ultimately, this makes Stalin more dangerous than Omni-man because he was a leader with the express consent of the people, as the Bolshevik Revolution was the direct result of the Soviet people’s belief that communism was a better system than their monarchy.

Francisco Franco was the dictator of Spain after the Spanish Civil War in 1939. He was a staunch conservative and supporter of the monarchy. During the Spanish Civil War, he was named the “general of generals” or “generalissimo” at the age of 33

("Francisco Franco"). During the war, his forces were known for their brutality, primarily through executions of people even suspected of sympathizing with the liberal party ("Francisco Franco"). In short, that is a form of attempted thought control, and it worked to some degree as he ordered the execution of tens of thousands of civilians. After the war and as the leader of Spain, he made it his mission to continue to stomp out the Spanish left. He imprisoned political opponents and even continued to execute liberal sympathizers ("Francisco Franco"). However, the most impressive policy against the left he held was that if a leftist woman had a baby in prison, the regime would take the baby and place them in a "properly Spanish" home ("Francisco Franco"). Franco's approach to power is akin to Omni-Man in that he used fear and paranoia to achieve his goal: to control the thoughts and attitudes of his constituents. A significant factor in Franco and Omni-Man's successes is their ability to intimidate based on their history. For example, there is a scene in *Invincible* when Omni-Man stops, lands next to a car, and leans into the window to ask where Invincible is. When the driver gives an answer that Omni-Man did not find satisfactory, he punches the car's roof and dents it, intimidating the driver into giving more information. Ultimately, using one's power as intimidation or blackmail is morally wrong and irresponsible.

Omni-Man, Franco, and Stalin all were beloved by the public despite doing some dark things, many of which were initially kept secret. They were people who found themselves in situations where they wielded vast amounts of power. Despite the adoration and power they held, they were not morally right because of their misuse of power. Omni-Man mirrors the real-world application of the dangers of what available power has the potential to do to any good intention.

## CHAPTER NINE

### Snape

*“Well, it may have escaped your notice, but life isn't fair.”*

Snape is the single greatest hero in the *Harry Potter* series, but he does not look or act like it. His intentions throughout the series are difficult to understand and appear, at best, questionable from the point of view of Harry, Ron, and Hermione, the main protagonists. At the very end, however, Snape reveals his true intentions and story and shows that he is a broken man whose only reason to live is to take care of what remains of the dead woman he loves. That means that Harry, her son, is what he cares for the most. Snape's part in the *Harry Potter* series is complicated because for Snape to fulfill his purpose, he needs to reconcile his past, including men bullying him, Harry's dad among them, with his goal of protecting the last living remnant of Lily Potter, the woman he loves. Snape plays a prominent role in the eight *Harry Potter* films, but he plays an even more critical role in the seven books, which is what I will focus on because the reader only primarily knows what Harry does, which limits the information available to the audience. Snape's character is also more mysterious but better explained in the books.

Snape's life before the *Harry Potter* series is unfortunate. His family was abusive growing up, but he had a lone bright spot in his life: Lily. Lily lived nearby, and while they both attended Hogwarts, they were placed in opposite houses. Snape was in Slytherin, and Lily in Gryffindor. As they grew up and advanced in school, Snape became natural enemies with James Potter and his gang of friends, Sirius Black, Peter Pettigrew, and Remus Lupin. However, Potter and his gang bullied Snape, the details of which are

revealed piece by piece as the series continues. What the reader understands and knows about Snape shifts as they read the story.

In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, Snape is a bully who calls Harry out in his first potions class for taking notes. As the story progresses, the protagonists learn of the sorcerer's stone, a powerful object that can create riches and grant immortality at will. Snape is introduced during the opening feast of the year, and it is revealed that Snape is head of Slytherin, which Harry already dislikes, and that he teaches potions. Harry gets a bad feeling from looking at him. He later meets Snape in class, and Snape goes out of his way to try to humiliate Harry for not knowing anything. As the story continues, Hagrid, Harry's friend, and Hermione tell Harry that Snape is a Hogwarts teacher and, as such, has his best interests in mind. However, when a troll breaks into the school, the protagonists have reason to believe that Snape is trying to steal the sorcerer's stone and that he is bullying Professor Quirrell, a timid professor protecting the stone, into giving up what he knows about how to get around the defenses. Harry then plays a Quidditch match, the popular wizard sport played on broomsticks, and his broom malfunctions. Harry nearly falls off his broom to his death. Hermione notices that Snape is casting a spell and discreetly sets him on fire, stopping it. Harry believes that as the year continues, Snape will steal the sorcerer's stone to revive Voldemort. The protagonists go through the defenses until Harry makes it to the final defense and finds Professor Quirrell, who explains that he was trying to curse Harry during Quidditch and that Snape was stopping him. Harry then confronts Voldemort, who lives on the back of Quirrell's head, and faints. He awakens and speaks with Dumbledore, who tells Harry that his father saved

Snape's life when they were at school. The book ends with everybody going their separate ways for the summer.

In *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Snape has a down year in terms of attention. The protagonists suspect Draco Malfoy of being the heir of Slytherin and killing students who were born to muggle parents. It was another ploy by Voldemort to regain power, which Harry, Ron, and Hermione stopped. Snape quietly helps expose Professor Lockhart, a celebrity author teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts, as a fraud and teaches the protagonists some vital pieces of knowledge that help them. His teaching helped them learn about Polyjuice Potion, which allows the user to assume the appearance of others and a stunning spell that Harry makes good use of for the rest of the series.

In the third book, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Snape must confront the demons of his past. Sirius Black, a supposed mass murderer and supporter of Voldemort, breaks out of prison and is on the run from the authorities and is spotted close to Hogwarts. Eventually, Harry, Ron, and Hermione discover that Sirius is innocent. Before that, a new professor, Professor Lupin, starts his first year at Hogwarts, and Snape is noticeably frosty towards him. Lupin and Sirius were part of the gang that bullied Snape when they were in school. Lupin is also a werewolf and must take a leave of absence once a month during the full moon. Snape brews a potion once a month for Lupin that pacifies him during the full moon, but he also provides Hermione with all the information to conclude that Lupin is a werewolf. Towards the end of the book, Harry, Ron, and Hermione follow a massive black dog that steals Ron's rat, Scabbers, into a tunnel. Snape and Lupin follow them down, and the black dog transforms into Sirius, and

Scabbers transforms into Peter Pettigrew. In short, besides Harry's father, the gang that bullied Snape is present with Snape and the protagonists. Harry is livid with Sirius and wants to kill him because he believes that Snape betrayed his parents to Voldemort. However, Lupin and Sirius explain to Harry that Pettigrew betrayed them and then framed Sirius. Amid all of this, Harry incapacitates Snape before this conversation, and Snape ends up binding all parties once he wakes up and takes them to the castle. Snape then receives an Order of Merlin, the equivalent of a Nobel Prize, for stopping Sirius Black. However, Harry and Hermione reverse time and find a way to free Sirius and ensure Snape loses his Order of Merlin. In the middle of all this, Snape and Harry have a confrontation where Harry tells him that his father saved his life, but Snape informs Harry that his father put him in danger. Once a month, Lupin would transform into a werewolf in a boarded-up cabin so he could not hurt anyone, and his three friends would go with him and transform into animals. Snape, curious about where they went once a month and on Sirius's advice on how to get into the tunnel, followed Lupin into the tunnel. However, Harry's father stopped him from running into a fully-grown werewolf, saving his life. The book ends with Pettigrew disappearing, Lupin resigning from his position, Black going into hiding, Snape disliking Harry more than ever, and an ominous prophecy from the divination professor that Voldemort's servant would ensure his return.

In the fourth book, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Snape takes a backseat to Harry's participation in a deadly tournament. Even though he is underage, he participates because of a plot to place him in the tournament by one of Voldemort's supporters, which would legally bind him to compete. In the meantime, Snape notices that the dark mark, a tattoo on the forearm of Voldemort's supporters, has reappeared, signifying Voldemort

regaining his strength. The only significant interaction that Snape and Harry have is when Snape accuses Harry of stealing potion supplies and threatens to magically coerce him into revealing any secrets. During the last tournament event, Harry is transported to Voldemort, and he returns to power. Upon Harry's return to Hogwarts, Snape goes to Voldemort and resumes his role as a double agent. During Voldemort's first reign of terror, Snape was a double agent for Dumbledore, but he made Voldemort believe that he was a double agent for him. Upon Voldemort's return, Snape assures Voldemort that he is on his side when the opposite is true.

In the fifth book, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Snape assists Harry in fighting Voldemort. Harry and Voldemort have a neural connection, and upon discovering this, Dumbledore instructs Snape to teach Harry occlumency, the magic of guarding one's mind. Snape humiliates Harry by forcing him to account for their extra time as extra tutoring because Harry is inept at potions. Harry struggles to learn occlumency. As time passes, Harry, angry and exhausted from the constant training to learn a branch of magic in which he has little natural talent, intrudes into Snape's mind by deliberately looking at his memories in a penseive, a device that allows the user to view previous memories. The memory he sees is of his father bullying Snape horribly by casting spells at him. Understandably, Snape refuses to teach Harry anything else from that point forward. However, Snape does several things to assist Harry, including giving Professor Umbridge, a Ministry of Magic-appointed educator and inquisitor who tries to purge Hogwarts of radical ideas, namely that Voldemort is back, a fake truth serum instead of an actual truth serum, passing on Harry's message to Dumbledore that Voldemort had kidnapped Sirius Black, and subsequently discovering that Harry had

fallen for Voldemort's trap. Ultimately, Snape still receives blame from Harry for not being fast enough to save Sirius from death.

In the sixth book, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, Snape sacrifices himself for the greater good in a way few other characters could match. It starts when Dumbledore receives a death sentence from a cursed ring. The curse will kill him, but Snape helps to prolong his life. Meanwhile, Voldemort assigns Draco Malfoy to assassinate Dumbledore and find a way to bring a strike team into Hogwarts. Snape makes an unbreakable vow with Draco's mother to do everything in his power to protect him. As the year continues, Dumbledore tells Snape to kill him to protect Draco's relative innocence and to solidify his cover as Voldemort's greatest servant. Dumbledore and Harry discover that the cursed ring is one of the Horcruxes, magical objects imbued with a piece of Voldemort's soul that ensures his immortality. Upon their return, Snape and Draco visit Dumbledore. With Harry watching, Snape kills Dumbledore. Livid, Harry chases Snape down and reveals that he is the previous owner of one of Harry's books, which Harry has been using all year in potions and helped him rise to stardom under a new professor. Harry had admired whoever left the notes in his textbook all year, and it was Snape.

In the seventh book, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Snape carries out Dumbledore's final plan to defeat Voldemort. Snape, the new headmaster of Hogwarts, protects his students even with a pair of Death Eaters, supporters of Voldemort, stationed there to impose Voldemort's will. Midway through the year, Snape sends his Patronus, a being of light unique to each person, to guide Harry to a sword capable of destroying Horcruxes. At this point, most of the wizarding world, not loyal to Voldemort, hates

Snape for his role in Dumbledore's death. Harry, Ron, and Hermione spend the year tracking down Horcruxes and return to Hogwarts at the end in search of the last several. Upon their return, the other teachers toss Snape out of Hogwarts, believing him a turncoat who betrayed Dumbledore. Snape returns to Voldemort, who plans to assault Hogwarts to kill Harry. Voldemort has recently gained the elder wand, formerly Dumbledore's, which is the most powerful wand in existence. Because Snape killed Dumbledore, Voldemort believes he would need to kill Snape for him to be able to use it effectively. Hidden, Harry watches Voldemort assault Snape and then leave him to die. Just before Snape dies, he gives Harry his memories, which reveal his and Dumbledore's plan for Harry to defeat Voldemort. Through the memories, Harry learns that Snape loved Harry's mother and felt an obligation to protect Harry. He also shows Harry where his loyalties lie and that Harry is a Horcrux, meaning he must die for Voldemort to die. Snape's information spurs Harry to die briefly and defeat Voldemort for the last time.

Snape plays several roles throughout the *Harry Potter* series. The first and most important of these is a protector. He goes out of his way to protect Harry and Draco above all else, even if that places him in danger of physical harm and harms his reputation. This is first evident in *The Sorcerer's Stone* when he brings a counter-curse against Quirrell's attempt to harm Harry during the Quidditch match. In the next match that Harry plays, Snape volunteers to be the referee to keep a closer eye on him. He protects Harry in the first book, specifically in those two instances, despite placing himself in a vulnerable position. Hermione does light Snape on fire, but given Snape's previous hostility to Harry in Potions class, it is understandable that Hermione would

believe that Snape was harming Harry instead of helping him. What appears to be a villain doing heroic acts is a recurring theme with Snape.

In the third book, Snape has selfish motivations to bust his former bullies when he follows Lupin and the protagonists into the tunnel. However, he does what any reasonable adult would do in that situation and puts the safety of his students first, even if he is abrasive to all other parties in the process. Harry still incapacitates him while Snape is doing the rational thing, but Snape decides to do what is right for the wrong reasons. He wants to help Harry, but he wants to take down Sirius and Lupin more. In this scenario, Snape is a hero with questionable motives behind his good deeds.

In the fifth book, Snape agrees to teach Harry occlumency even though their relationship is, at best, antagonistic. When Harry invades his memories, Snape does not teach him anything more because of Harry's breach of privacy. Despite this, Snape still aids Harry in several significant ways. The true villain of this book is Professor Umbridge, and she attempts to harm Harry multiple times through excruciating detentions, interrogations assisted by truth serum, restrictions of freedom and ideas, physical harm from spells, and slandering Harry's reputation to the rest of the wizarding world. Snape is crucial in this book in protecting Harry. He provides Umbridge with fake truth serum and claims that he has eventually run out, and he passes Harry's message about Sirius being in danger to allies that can help. This directly leads to a team from Dumbledore's organization, The Order of the Phoenix, rescuing Harry and his friends from their doomed attempt to rescue Sirius. Without Snape, Voldemort's ploy to lure Harry out of Hogwarts by planting visions from himself would have succeeded.

In the sixth book, Snape protects Draco's alleged innocence when he kills Dumbledore rather than forcing Draco to do it. From that point of view, the importance of his decision cannot be understated because Snape goes out of his way to protect him in such a way that furthers Dumbledore's plot to destroy Voldemort. It also establishes that Snape's protection of Harry is not exclusive and extends to at least one other student, which shows that Snape's actions partly originate from a place of doing what is right.

Snape is also the ultimate double agent. Snape was initially a supporter of Voldemort, but he changed sides when he learned Voldemort was going after Harry during Voldemort's initial reign. Upon Voldemort's return, Snape arrives at Voldemort's side after the rest of his followers, which understandably gives Voldemort reason to distrust him. Showing up is incredibly dangerous because if he does not gain Voldemort's favor and convince him that he brings something to the table, the likely outcome is that Voldemort kills Snape. To Snape's credit, he convinces Voldemort that he is his servant when the opposite is true and is feeding Dumbledore information. Given his appearance, angry and pompous demeanor, and disdain for many of his allies on Dumbledore's side, Harry, Ron, and Hermione eventually believe he is genuinely on Voldemort's side.

Double agents must betray one of the two parties to which they have sworn allegiance. Snape does this twice and to both sides. The first time is in book six when he kills Dumbledore. Harry awakens Snape upon Dumbledore's request because Dumbledore is badly injured. Rather than helping Dumbledore, Snape kills him as Draco's plot to bring Death Eaters to Hogwarts succeeds. His actions destroy any belief in Harry that Snape is in any way an ally to him. The ripple effect from there through The

Order of the Phoenix is extreme distrust and even hate, as Snape appears to have betrayed his friends.

The closest comparison to the weight of Snape's betrayal is Judas Iscariot's betrayal of Jesus. The Bible states, "While he was still speaking, there came a crowd, and the man called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He drew near to Jesus to kiss him, but Jesus said to him, 'Judas, would you betray the son of man with a kiss?'" (Luke 22.47-48). Judas appeared as a friend about to assist Jesus, but he was maliciously betraying him to the authorities. Judas received payment for his work, "and said, 'what will you give me if I deliver him over to you?' And they paid him thirty pieces of silver" (Matthew 16.15). Judas' betrayal is worse than Snape's because he did not betray him for the greater good as Snape did but for money. Dumbledore requests that Snape kill him as it is an essential part of his plan, but Jesus does not ask Judas to betray him even though it is also a critical part of his plan. Judas received about \$3,000 in today's money, a non-arbitrary amount, but an amount not nearly substantial enough to change lives (Kosloski). Snape's betrayal of Dumbledore is redeemable when considering the outcome, but Judas's is not because it was solely for personal, material gain.

In the seventh book, Snape, the double agent, finishes his mission and tells Harry that every horrible thing he did had a hidden agenda and was done out of love. Snape, the protector, continued to protect Hogwarts students per Dumbledore's request, even as a pair of Death Eaters inhabited the school. Snape ensured they did not harm anybody too severely while maintaining his cover. Snape, the double agent, sprang into action when Harry, Ron, and Hermione needed a tool to destroy Horcruxes, guiding them to the sword of Gryffindor. Snape surely did not die as he intended, but his last act was one of love. As

he lay dying, he gave Harry his memories, specifically the ones that communicated his love for his mother, Lily, and his desperation to save her from Voldemort as the driving force behind him flipping sides. Upon Lily's death, Snape resolved to protect the last vestige of Lily, Harry, at any cost. Ultimately, this forced him to make difficult choices, including betraying Voldemort and his former allies who served him. However, it was for the greater good and proved that he was brave enough to leave everything he knew behind him for something he believed to be worth more than everything.

A real-world example that matches the intensity of a difficult decision made out of love is that made by David Kaczynski, the younger brother of Ted Kaczynski, the notorious Unabomber. Between 1978 and 1995, Ted Kaczynski committed sixteen bombings against departments of science or math at different universities ("Ted Kaczynski's brother David recalls coming to realization of Unabomber's identity in archival WAMC interview"). In 1995, Ted published his manifesto, a warning against the increasing use of technology and an explanation for why fighting the rise of technology justified his violence ("Ted Kaczynski's brother David recalls coming to realization of Unabomber's identity in archival WAMC interview"). He was a brilliant yet confused and mentally ill man diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia who was concerned with academia and its effect on the rise in technology ("Ted Kaczynski's brother David recalls coming to realization of Unabomber's identity in archival WAMC interview"). When he published his manifesto, David read it, compared the language in the manifesto to his brother's letters, and found many disturbing similarities ("Ted Kaczynski's brother David recalls coming to realization of Unabomber's identity in archival WAMC interview"). Rather than look the other way to protect his brother, David made the difficult choice to

turn Ted into the FBI to protect others and Ted from himself. This decision was born out of love, but a love that understands that making a difficult decision could potentially mean betraying and inflicting pain on someone else. While not the same, this is the same decision Snape made when he killed Dumbledore and betrayed Voldemort. Both problematic choices were necessary for Snape to accomplish what he cares for: protecting and aiding Harry in his fight against Voldemort.

Snape's story is a tragedy. People bullied him in school, he watched as his archrival married the woman he loved, learned of a plot to kill the same woman, betrayed everything he knew in an attempt to save her, failed to save the woman, resolved to protect her son, was reminded of losing the woman to his archrival and of his failure to save her every time he looked at her son, and betrayed both sides of a war in such a way that provided her son with a way to vanquish Voldemort. His lot in life was unfair, but he focused on what was necessary, and he stuck to it despite being constantly judged by the protagonists for his appearance, demeanor, and repeated attempts to bully them. He is a nontraditional hero who had the misfortune of appearing and acting as one toward Harry through much of the series. His decision to do so is admirable, especially given that his heroism is unseen for much of the story, and he knowingly subjects himself to scrutiny.

## CHAPTER TEN

### Conclusion

Morality is not neatly and equally split between what is good and evil, but it does something more substantial for humanity's freedom: it provides the opportunity for humans to choose. Even though humans are innately evil, we have the capacity to do good things, which ultimately makes the decision between good and evil a decision of evil by omission or good by choice. Given that the results of all decisions are visible only while we are alive, it is illogical to think of decisions impacting a higher plane of existence, such as heaven with a deity, for two reasons: we do not know what happens after death, and it is unfair to judge the human condition in this context as if a deity imposed its will on humans. This is because it leads to an implication that all human decisions are ultimately a result of said deity and not humans, which tells us nothing about humanity. This thinking is Aristotelian because it considers the reality that what is important is what the human senses are aware of and nothing more. Therefore, by this logic, human morality only considers morally right choices done for the sake of being good and constructing a better society and future for humanity.

In *The Parable of the Madman*, Friedrich Nietzsche posited that rising secularism was undermining the traditional foundations of religion in Western culture. The crucial part of his argument is that humans are responsible, at the very least, for being complicit in not stopping the rise of secularism and societal drift from the Christian Church. In the parable, a madman runs through a town square and exclaims that he is looking for God (Nietzsche). The answer he receives back from a villager is, "I shall tell you. We have killed him - you and I. We are his murderers" (Nietzsche, 180). The man who asks for

God is also described as a madman, providing further evidence for the subtext that any decisions on good and evil are up to the individual. The hypothetical absence of a higher deity implies that humanity's moral journey and balance between right and wrong must exist for the benefit of each individual and those around them. The morally right thing, therefore, is to maximize benefits and happiness for most people. This utilitarian approach is the only logical morality system in a world where morality exists standalone from a higher deity.

The analyzed villains in this thesis find themselves at a breaking point between deciding for the better and failing to understand the greater benefit of the majority. Darth Vader tries to heal himself from the trauma of losing his wife, children, and mother, but he enforces a cruel empire with an iron fist and imposes his will on the galaxy. Loki strives to better his situation, but he does it by trying to conquer Earth before discovering that he can make decisions that benefit more than himself. Thanos fears that the universe will suffer from overpopulation and gorge itself to death, so he uses an extreme plan that he believes would have saved his homeworld from such a fate. Deadpool lives only for himself, but he strives for better in a very untraditional way because people around him believe he can do more for others. The films of *The Purge* exemplify a world where people ignore their choices and elect to fight each other for domination and power. The Joker, although mad, strives to reveal hypocrisy in how society will treat certain members better than others. Omni-Man serves his world, but he does it through conquering planets such as Earth, where he is unilaterally the most powerful being and kills to establish power. Snape is a true hero who has the misfortune of living as a villain for much of his life, and his memory is redeemed after his death.

The stories of these villains and those like them exemplify that humans have a complicated relationship with morality. The most important thing to learn from this analysis is that evil actions are choices, regardless of circumstance or personal inclinations. All humans have the capacity to do what is right. However, the characters dissected here primarily made objectively evil decisions, but the capacity for good and even the motivations for the evil deeds could be redeemable from a utilitarian perspective. These characters strived to do what was right, only to fail in their quest. Therefore, the lesson is that we must choose to do the right thing: to be morally redeemable, regardless of circumstances and preconceived notions.

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