

UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO RIO GRANDE DO NORTE
CENTRO DE CIÊNCIAS HUMANAS, LETRAS E ARTES
DEPARTAMENTO DE LÍNGUAS E LITERATURAS ESTRANGEIRAS MODERNAS
TRABALHO DE CONCLUSÃO DE CURSO

HUGO VICTOR BEZERRA FERREIRA

HERO AND VILLAIN:

An analysis of the tropes in the graphic novel *The Killing Joke*

NATAL

2023

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Trabalho de Conclusão do Curso apresentado à
Coordenação do Curso de Licenciatura em Letras
Inglês da Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do
Norte como requisito para obtenção do Título de
Licenciado em Letras Inglês.

Orientador: Prof. Dr. Orison Marden Bandeira de
Melo Junior

NATAL

2023

Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte - UFRN

Sistema de Bibliotecas - SISBI

Catálogo de Publicação na Fonte. UFRN - Biblioteca Setorial do Centro de Ciências Humanas, Letras e Artes - CCHLA

Ferreira, Hugo Victor Bezerra.

Hero and villain: an analysis of the tropes in the graphic novel
The Killing Joke / Hugo Victor Bezerra Ferreira. - 2023.

32f.: il.

Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso - TCC (graduação) - Universidade
Federal do Rio Grande do Norte, Centro de Ciências Humanas, Letras
e Artes, Letras - Inglês, Natal, RN, 2023.

Orientação: Prof. Dr. Orison Marden Bandeira de Melo Junior.

1. Theory of comics. 2. Graphic Novel. 3. The Killing Joke. I.
Melo Junior, Orison Marden Bandeira de. II. Título.

RN/UF/BS-CCHLA

CDU 811.111

Elaborado por Ana Luísa Lincka de Sousa - CRB-15/748

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Natal, dezembro de 2023

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To my mom who fought for me more than I ever could.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To all my friends, especially Arthur Silva, who did not leave my side on this journey, took my hand and lifted me when I fell.

To Pedro Aguiar who has gone through so much with me, encouraged me through a long time, and still does this. Who saw almost entirely my evolution very closely.

To Vinicius Pereira who believed in me more than myself.

To all my teachers who saw in me a clever person and believed in me.

To my advisor who helped me through this work and came to me when I could not ask for help.

To my TCC defense committee, who willingly accepted to be part of the construction of this work.

ABSTRACT

This monograph delves into the intricate narrative elements employed by authors to deconstruct the conventional trope of the villain and the hero. Focusing on the verbal and non-verbal language used by characters and the visual storytelling of comics, our research aims to identify the nuanced elements that authors utilize to redefine the villain concept in *The Killing Joke*, written in 1988 by Alan Moore. Our theoretical framework is based on comics and sequential art theory, focusing on superhero characteristics, the evolution of ages in comics, and potential superhero archetypes. We will also discuss Eisner's theory of comics, which includes crucial interpretive elements such as imagery, timing, frame, and expressive anatomy. Based upon these concepts, we analyzed the graphic novel *The Killing Joke*, seeking to unveil the compelling dichotomy between the hero and the villain. We concluded that the author indeed uses some narrative elements to subvert the tropes of both the villain and the hero.

Keywords: Theory of comics. Graphic Novel. Narrative tropes. *The Killing Joke*.

RESUMO

Esta monografia investiga os intrincados elementos narrativos utilizados pelos autores para desconstruir o convencional tropo do vilão e do herói. Ao focar na linguagem verbal e não verbal usada pelas personagens e na narrativa visual das histórias em quadrinhos, nossa pesquisa tem como objetivo identificar os elementos sutis que os autores utilizam para redefinir o conceito de vilão em *The Killing Joke*, escrito em 1988 por Alan Moore. Nosso arcabouço teórico tem como base a teoria dos quadrinhos e da arte sequencial com foco nas características dos super-heróis, a evolução das eras nas histórias em quadrinhos e possíveis arquétipos de super-heróis. Também discutiremos a teoria dos quadrinhos de Eisner, que inclui elementos interpretativos cruciais, como imagens, temporização, quadro e anatomia expressiva. Com base nesses conceitos, analisamos a história em quadrinhos intitulada *The Killing Joke*, revelando a fascinante dicotomia entre o herói e o vilão. Concluímos que o autor de fato usa elementos narrativos para subverter os tropos de vilão e o de herói.

Palavras-chave: Teoria dos Quadrinhos. Histórias em quadrinhos. Tropo Narrativo. *The Killing Joke*.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Literature has a complex definition and it cannot be defined in just one paragraph of a monography, but to look by the optics of this work, I will take a simple definition such as a complex system involving many symbols such as pictures, letters, shadows, lines, shapes, and other elements. Literature is not only what I defined here and it would take a whole monography to define what literature is.

If we look closely, comic books and graphic novels are composed of writing and images mostly. These elements are displayed on the page in a way that will make more sense to the narrative, and sometimes we have the writing in different visual compositions. In addition, in the *Oxford Online Dictionary*, we can find the following definition for the noun “literature”: “pieces of writing or printed information on a particular subject”. Henceforth, we can briefly understand how comic books and graphic novels are a form of literature and, consequently a genre.

Over the past decades, comics have been the subject of many books exploring different aspects of the comics such as the history of comics or interesting facts; also, much research has been done exploring the various themes of comics. Some universities even have courses on this theme. The first comic book, with the structure that we know nowadays, *The Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck*, was published by a writer in Switzerland called Rudophe Töpffer in 1837. But comic books did not become popular until 1930, with the necessity of superheroes, or men and women with strength beyond human capabilities as Babic (2014, page 10-11) observes. The company that profited from this necessity was Detective Comics, which has created Superman, Wonder Woman, and Batman. In addition, Action Comics has created characters, such as Captain America and Spider-Man. The rising popularity of comic books also had another stimulus, i.e., it was the affordable material and printer, along with the fascinating stories. The American comic book publisher Detective Comics started to make many diverse stories with a continuous script, making the narratives more interesting.

The object of this research is the graphic novel *The Killing Joke*, written in 1988 by Alan Moore. This controversial story brought a new layer to the characters that readers have known for a long time. It tells the story of a man who has a terrible day and loses his sanity. Years later, he wants to prove to the whole city of Gotham that it just takes one bad day to go insane. The story has as its main characters the Joker and Batman, two antagonist characters that were already well known, looked at from a different perspective.

This graphic novel provokes the interest of other researchers. Joel West (2020, p. 94) states: “The graphic narrative of *The Killing Joke* is, in a sense full-blown cinema, a visual journey which illustrates that the struggle between ostensible good and evil is merely two sides of the same coin and also that crucially to be human is to be resilient.” In his research, he explores the tropes of good and evil in this story and how they work together or even in the opposite to create a new, human trope. In literature, a trope is a common theme or idea that writers often use. It could be a specific way of describing something, a recurring story element, or a familiar character type. Tropes can be employed to convey meaning, create expectations, or evoke specific emotions, and they may be employed in various genres and forms of literature.

Another researcher who works with this graphic novel is Deneb Kozikoski Valereto. In his book titled *Philosophy in the Fairground: Thoughts on Madness and Madness in Thought in The Killing Joke*. Valereto (2011) works with subjects related to psychology, looking further at the Joker and his relation with madness, bringing different perspectives. However, these research studies do not focus on the verbal language used by the author to represent Batman and the Joker.

Therefore, our research aims to answer the following research question: What elements of the narrative does the author use to deconstruct and subvert the trope of the villain and the hero?

The main objective of this research is to find the elements of the narrative used by the author to deconstruct the trope of the hero and the villain. To find an answer, we will investigate aspects of verbal language used by the characters and non-verbal language employed by the cartoonists. We attempt to find both verbal and non-verbal language elements that the author utilizes to re-signify the villain.

In this first section, we introduced the importance of this research, our main objective, and the previous research about *The Killing Joke*. The theory of comics and sequential art will be the main object of study that will help to achieve the objective of this research, looking further into the concept of the construction of the heroes in comic books in the second section, in which some elements will be explored, such as the characteristics of the superheroes, the ages in comics, and the possible superheroes. In this third section, we will look into the theory of comics presented by Eisner, which consists of some elements of interpretation such as imagery, timing, frame, and expressive anatomy. Then, based on these concepts, in the fourth section, we will analyze the graphic novel, showing the interesting dichotomy between the hero and the villain portrayed in these comics. Finally, in the fifth section, we will present the final remarks and answer the research question.

2 CONSTRUCTION OF HEROES IN COMIC BOOKS

In this section, we will discuss the characteristics of a superhero, looking further into the required elements to understand how Batman is portrayed as a superhero in pop culture. We will also discuss other important elements of the comics, the possible first superheroes, and the ages in comic books.

2.1 Characteristics of a superhero

In his book *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, Coogan (2006) brings up some substantial discussion about superheroes. One of these discussions is about who would be the first superhero in history; besides, he defines what characteristics a superhero must have, such as mission, powers, identity, supervillain, and other conventions of the superhero genre.

The first characteristic presented by the author is *Mission*, and Coogan (2006, p.24) affirms that a hero cannot be a hero without having as a mission the selfless and prosocial act to help others in need, never thinking about his goodwill. Otherwise, he would be a person with an individual crisis trying to help others. Coogan (2006 p.24) even gives as an example two types of individuals with superhuman strength. The first one is Hugo Hercules, who uses his strength to help a train go back to the tracks, and the second one is Hugo Danner, who uses his strength to make a life on the circle. Another example that could have been written is someone trying to escape a guilty feeling of having something awesome with himself and not sharing this with anyone. This person could be called an anti-hero because doing good to others and being selfish sometimes fits parts of the definition of an anti-hero.

The second definition Coogan (2006) explores is *Powers*, which a superhuman capability that some characters are born with, developed during life, and gained with an experiment or an accident. Coogan (2006, p.24, 25) uses Superman as an example of his strength and speed. But we have a lot of unimaginable powers nowadays. If we look at the Marvel or DC website, we will be able to see a lot of heroes and their powers. One of the most famous superheroes is Spider-Man, who develops powers (superhuman agility, strength, and reflexes; ability to cling to surfaces; “spider-sense” precognition) after a radioactive spider bites him. Also, Wonder Woman is a demigod and has other abilities (superhuman strength, durability, agility; lasso of truth, indestructible bracelets, and divine weaponry). Batman is a famous character who does not have any superpowers but developed some superhuman abilities

that could be taken as superpowers, which are: highly skilled in hand-to-hand combat, detective work, and gadgetry.

The identity of a superhero, which is the third definition, composed of the codename and the costume, is an important part of their construction. According to Coogan (2006, p. 32), this characteristic is related to either their inner character or their biography. The author uses two heroes as examples to assert this definition. First, Superman, whose codename and costume are related to his inner character. Second, Batman, whose codename and costume are related to his biography due to his experience with bats.

The superhero costume is the fourth definition and is an integral part of their identity. Coogan (2006, p. 33) cites Superman as an example of how the costume is related to his identity. The "S" on Superman's chest is a characteristic that reflects his personality and identity. Also, the bright colors of his costume are an example of his joyful and gentle identity. Similarly, Batman performs his identity with dark clothes and a suit that bears a resemblance to a bat.

2.2 Characteristics of a supervillain

Coogan (2006) also dives into the characteristics of a villain, or a supervillain as he classifies:

Just as a hero represents the virtues and values of a society or culture, a villain represents an inversion of those values. But more than that a supervillain has the ability to enact that inversion, to bring the normal activities of a society to a halt and force a hero to arise to defend those virtues. (Coogan, 2006, p.61)

The author divides the types of villains into five types, the monster, the enemy commander, the mad scientist, the criminal mastermind, and the inverted superhero supervillain. The first type, the monster, explores the archetype of the supervillain, focusing on the oldest type known as "the monster." These villains are often depicted as the inverse of humanity, taking on beastly forms like werewolves or giant reptiles. When monsters have a human form, they are considered morally monstrous, lacking a moral sense or possessing a perverted one, symbolized by their absence of a soul. The second type, the enemy commander, explores the second oldest type of supervillain, characterized by the enemy commander archetype. This type is represented by figures in positions of legal authority within a society, such as kings, tyrants, dictators, or military commanders. The quintessential example is John Milton's Satan from *Paradise Lost*, who rules the kingdom of Hell and opposes the will of Heaven and God. The third type, the mad scientist, is typically characterized by obsessive

behavior and the use of dangerous or unorthodox methods. They often harbor motivations rooted in revenge, settling real or imagined slights related to their unconventional studies. The fourth type is the criminal mastermind, this character is typically portrayed as an exceptionally intelligent, cunning, and often charismatic individual who orchestrates complex criminal schemes to challenge and defeat the story's protagonist, usually a superhero or detective. The supervillain criminal mastermind is characterized by a range of traits, including high intellect, physical prowess, lack of moral constraints, and a strategic mindset. These characters often exhibit a deep-seated desire for power, domination, or the pursuit of their twisted ideologies. The supervillain criminal mastermind serves as a formidable adversary, posing not only a physical threat but also a psychological challenge for the hero or protagonist in the narrative. The last type of supervillain brought by Coogan (2006) is the inverted superhero, this type of supervillain is unique because they possess superpowers, codenames, and costumes similar to superheroes. Notable examples include the Joker and Catwoman, who represent an innovation in villainy as direct responses to the superhero genre. What sets the inverted superhero supervillain apart is their ability to transition into becoming superheroes themselves. Marvel Comics showcases several supervillains who eventually join the ranks of the heroes, such as Hawkeye, Black Widow, Quicksilver, Scarlet Witch, and the Sandman. This capacity for transformation is traced back to characters like the Sub-Mariner, whose mixed heritage and identity tensions allowed him to oscillate between anti-heroic and villainous roles based on the context of the times.

After looking into the characteristics of a villain, we will discuss the comic history, more specifically the ages in the comics.

2.3 The ages in the comics

Superheroes' stories have increased a lot since Superman's first appearance and their success thrives even nowadays. Throughout the years we had three best-known ages of superhero comics.

The first one is the Golden Age, which started with Superman Action Comics #1, 1938, and ended with the first appearance of Plastic Man #64, 1956. According to Coogan (2006), this Age conveys two main types of history: verisimilar stories, such as corporate crimes, political corruption, automobile safety, and mining; and patriotic stories, "[e]specially after Pearl Harbor, superheroes went to war against the nation's enemies, often directly participating

in military action and championing ‘a loosely defined Americanism synonymous with lofty ideals like democracy, liberty, and freedom from oppression’” (Coogan, 2006 p.202).

The second one is the Silver Age, which started with the new Flash in Showcase #4 (October 1956) to Teen Titans #31 (January-February 1971). This Age was characterized by the revival of past characters that were not doing well at that moment. Furthermore, this Age has melodrama, continuity, and villains redeemed becoming superheroes. It is essential to mention that Coogan (2006 p.207) states that: “The Silver Age began with a whole-hearted acceptance of the status quo and constructed authority and ended with superheroes doubting the status quo and resisting authority.”

The third well-known age is the Bronze Age, from Superman #233 (January 1971), the end of Kryptonite, to Superboy #259 (January 1980). This comic era was the beginning of more adult stories; it added more complexity to the story. Furthermore, the characters had more adult responsibility. Coogan (2006 p.212) writes: “Peter Parker himself shifted from being a nerdy loser high school student to a handsome, Pulitzer-Prize winning, successful college graduate and professional photo-journalist.”

After having discussed the construction of heroes and comic books, the possible first heroes, and the age in the comics, we will discuss in section 3 the most important subject in the analysis, which is the Theory of comics.

3 THE THEORY OF COMICS

In this section, we will discuss the theory of comics brought by Will Eisner in his book. We will discuss how a comic book is constructed and explore the different elements that can be used to convey the specific meaning that the author wants the reader to perceive.

The first concept important to this research presented by Eisner (1985) is *Imagery*. Images and letters are the two objects that are utilized to make a comic. Eisner (1985, p.13), in his book titled “Comics and the sequential art”, brings a concept of letters different than the usual thinking. He states that “[l]etters are symbols that are devised out of images which originate out of familiar forms, objects, postures, and other phenomena.” The author uses this argument to show how to relate letters with symbols and symbols with communication. He also emphasizes how letters and lightning could change the perspective and the meaning of that visual composition. He also shows different perspectives of three characters on their knees, each one on a different panel. The recognizable objects, facial expressions, and the panel's words convey different situations.

The second concept that we will look into is the *Timing*. In his book, Eisner (1985) discusses how important time is to sequential art and how humans throughout time measure time with different tools and from different perspectives. Furthermore, he illustrates how *time* is different from *timing*. He does that by using two panels from a comic book. One of the panels has three images illustrating a sequence of death. The other panel is a sequence of five images that display the same sequence of death but with more drama. These two additional images have the objective of engaging the reader in the story, using as we will know as *timing*. Eisner (1985, p.26) exposes that *timing* is “the manipulation of the elements of time to achieve a specific message or emotion”.

The third concept here is the *Framing Speech*. To understand this concept, we have to understand that cartoonists can convey some elements in the graphic novel, even when it is hard. For example, we have an ethereal element in the narrative, the sound. An ethereal element should not be easy to draw, but cartoonists found a way for the reader can understand. Balloons are elements that the cartoonist established to convey sound. Eisner (1985, p. 26) asserts that “[t]he arrangement of balloons which surround speech - their position in relation to each other, or to the action, or their position with respect to the speaker, contribute to the measurement of time.”

Nowadays with the importance of comic books in literature, there are some established rules known to the readers, such as the order of reading, which is left-to-right and top-to-bottom

in Western countries. Also, there are some specific shapes of the balloons that convey different meanings.

Another concept that is important for us to analyze is the *Framing time*, which Eisner (1985, p.28) brings a reflection of Albert Einstein to elucidate the act of framing time: “Albert Einstein in his Special Theory (Relativity) states that time is not absolute but relative to the position of the observer.” Framing time is the act of making a panel portraying the position to the reader in relation to the scene and the action. It means that all symbols and elements are organized in one (or many) panels to give the reader the perception of the time necessary for the scene.

According to Eisner (1985), there are some strategies to give the reader the perception of time that cartoonists intend. They can use the elements or symbols in some of these strategies. The essential element to conveying time in comics is the panel, which can be used in different ways, such as the size, shape; and moving over. The number of panels can determine the length of time of the story. When time needs to be compressed, one of the strategies is the use of a large number of panels, as more panels mean a more segmented story. Another strategy using panels is the space between panels: when they are closer to each other, it gives the perception of a faster rate. Balloons can be used to give perceptions of time too, as they can have onomatopoeias that show an explosion, a scream, or another sound that helps to perceive time. Likewise, they can use elements to frame time, such as clocks, the sun and moon, and shadows, but there are some non-obvious ones too, such as the faucet drip or a beard on someone’s face.

The last concept brought by Eisner (1985) that we will dive into is *Expressive Anatomy*. The human body and face are used in comics to portray some feelings to the reader. So, to communicate the feeling to the reader successfully, cartoonists will use their knowledge of gestures and postures of the human body. This is extremely important to the comic because the main element employed in the comic is the visual composition.

After looking into these various ways to convey specific meaning to the reader, we can move to the analysis of the graphic novel *The Killing Joke*, which will be the main subject of investigation of this research.

4 THE KILLING JOKE

The Killing Joke written by Alan Moore and illustrated by Brian Bolland in 1988, is a controversial graphic novel that brought more importance to graphic novels. An article in the *Los Angeles Times* was published by Graeme McMillan on July 29, 2016, about how controversial and successful it is, as well as its movie adaptation from 2016.

Also, it is important to highlight the author's opinion about his work. In that same article from the *Los Angeles Times*, McMillan says that Alan Moore does not like his work because of how violent and nasty it is. The graphic novel is very violent; however, this monography does not intend to agree or disagree with how it was made – we just want to analyze one specific subject in the graphic novel which is the elements of deconstruction of the villain and in the hero.

The Killing Joke is a narrative that revolves around the iconic characters Batman and the Joker, exploring the complex and adversarial relationship between the two. The story delves into the psychological origins of the Joker, presenting a plausible backstory for the enigmatic character. It examines the thin line between sanity and madness, as the Joker attempts to drive Commissioner James Gordon to the brink of insanity through a series of disturbing and psychologically torturous events. Noteworthy for its dark and mature themes, the narrative questions the nature of morality and the consequences of one bad day, as it portrays the Joker's nihilistic worldview. The graphic novel's title, "The Killing Joke," alludes to the Joker's belief that anyone can be pushed to the point of madness under the right circumstances. The narrative unfolds with a non-linear structure, interweaving past and present events, adding layers of complexity to the characters and their motivations. In its exploration of the psychological dimensions of the characters, *The Killing Joke* has garnered acclaim for its nuanced storytelling, intricate artwork, and the thought-provoking themes it introduces into the Batman mythos.

We will analyze this graphic novel through the lens of Eisner, for, according to Eisner (1985, p. 142), graphic novels can be analyzed using the theory of comics since the elements of this form of literature are very similar to the comic book.

The following analysis of Batman and the Joker has elements that contribute to the deconstruction of the hero and the construction of empathy for the villain. We will begin with the representation of Batman.

4.1 The Representation of Batman

At the beginning of the story, it is raining, and Batman arrives at Arkham Asylum with his Batmobile, then he enters the mental hospital. This page has nine panels, different from the following pages, which contributes to a more accelerated narrative. Eisner (1985, p.30) says that:

For example, when there is a need to compress time, a great number of panels are used. The action then becomes more segmented, unlike the actions that occur in the larger, more conventional panels. By placing the panels together, we deal with the “rate” of elapsed time in its narrowest sense.

On this page, we also have panels of the same size which can be read as an element to maintain the rhythm of this story. To reinforce the argument, Eisner (1985, p.6) states that “[t]he rhythm is maintained by the use of narrow panels of equal size.” In relation to the characters now, right on the first page on the sixth panel, Batman’s shadow is huge, conveying an atmosphere of menace to the story. Also, on the eighth and ninth panels, we can see on the guard’s face that he looks scared and afraid of Batman’s figure.

Batman continues to enter the asylum. The panels are the same size, as said before, to maintain the rhythm. On the first and the second panels, it is possible to observe a scared receptionist. As Batman enters the room, she does not talk and seems to be afraid of him.

Afterward, Batman goes to the Joker’s cell to talk to him. There are only four panels on this page (Moore, 2019, p. 10). On three of them, Batman’s figure takes almost the entire panels, conveying a threatened feeling, indicating how both illustrator and author intended to portray Batman. On this page, the narrator says: “There were these two guys in a lunatic asylum” (Moore, 2019, p.10), which is a well-known start of jokes in English but also has the intention of portraying Batman as a lunatic, because he does not continue the joke and does not make explicit if these two guys are lunatic or not. One of the panels is wider, conveying the sensation of a pause in the rhythm; this concept is explained by Eisner (1985, p. 36).

Then, Batman starts to talk to the prisoner. He says:

I've been thinking lately about you and me. About what's going to happen to us. In the end. We're going to kill each other, aren't we? Perhaps you kill me. Perhaps I'll kill you. Perhaps sooner. Perhaps later. I just wanted to know I've made a genuine attempt to talk things over and avert that outcome Just Once. Are you listening to me? It's life and death that I'm discussing here. Maybe my death, maybe yours (Moore, 2019, p.11).

In his stories, Batman is famous for his code of no killing, as we can see in the following dialogue said by Red Hood to Batman, in another of Alan Moore’s comic book: *Batman: Under the Hood*: “If you had killed the Joker years ago beyond what happened to me, you know what

hell you would have saved this world. But no. His murder is a long list of sane acts you refused to commit. You never cross the line” (Moore, 2019, p. 33). This is an interesting choice of the author, for Batman in that dialogue uses the word “kill” many times, which conveys the sensation of the hero’s violent character.

The rhythm established on the former pages of *The Killing Joke* comes back. On this page, Joker makes a joke with Batman, because Batman went to the asylum to see him, but just found a person dressed as Joker. On the first and the second panels of page 11, we see the man who is dressed as Joker and Batman, they are taking almost the two panels. Also, in the fifth panel, they are mirrored, creating this feeling of antagonism. On the sixth panel, it is possible to observe Batman’s raging face, and on the following panel, Batman grabs the prisoner’s hand violently, contributing to the reader’s perception of how violent Batman is.

Batman continues to talk to the prisoner but acts more violently. On the 5th panel, Jim Gordon says: “Dear God, he’s gone berserk. Open the door, Man” (Moore, 2019, p 12). The definition of the expression “go berserk” in *The Collins' Dictionary* is: “If someone or something goes berserk, they lose control of themselves and become very angry or violent.” And in *The Encyclopedia Britannica*’s entry on berserker, which “berserk” is derived from, it says: “The berserkers’ savagery in battle and their animal-skin attire contributed to the development of the werewolf legend in Europe.” At this point, in the narrative, it is clear how violent the author wanted to portray Batman. We can observe this in the following image:

Figure 1: Violent Batman¹

Source: Moore (2019, p.12)

Later (p. 17-18), Batman is in his Batcave, looking obsessively at a Joker's card and images on his computer. The first panel on page 17 is narrower than the others. These shows a Joker's card on it, giving the feeling of enclosure. It seems that Batman is trying to make the Joker cornered. In the second panel, we can see the rage on Batman's face. On the fourth panel, Batman's shadow is large, as it is on the other pages. It is almost as big and threatening as a

¹The Publisher DC Comics authorized the use of images in this monography by email Copyright@wbd.com on Tuesday, November 28, 2023, at 11:31 AM.

dinosaur. On the last panel of page 17, we can see Batman's obsession with the Joker. This obsession could be analyzed in some categories, the first one is the idea that they are mirrored because both of them suffer significant traumas that shaped their lives. Batman lost his parents when he was a kid and the Joker had all that trauma that we will analyze in the representation of the Joker. Another way that we can analyze is the shared insanity, as Joker is trying to prove, maybe it just takes one bad day to drive someone into madness. Batman may also have this perception that there is a thin line between sanity and madness, maybe he is just a step away from succumbing to the chaos and insanity that the Joker represents. Now, to clarify some ideas, we will have a look at page 17:

Figure 2: Batman obsessed



Source: Moore (2019, p.17)

On the first panel of page 18, Batman's butler Alfred is at the door, and he is tiny, conveying the illusion that Batman is even bigger. The second panel is very narrow, which

could represent how enclosed Alfred feels. On the 6th and last panel of the page, there is the following line: “How can people hate each other so much” (Moore, 2019, p.19). The author brings up the word “hate” to clarify how much Batman despises the Joker and vice-versa. Batman's use of the word "hate" reflects the intensity of their relationship and the conflicting emotions that exist between them. It suggests that, despite Batman's commitment to justice and his desire to rehabilitate criminals, there is an element of personal animosity directed toward the Joker. This word conveys the depth of Batman's emotional response to the Joker's actions and the frustration he feels in trying to understand and reform his nemesis. These conflicting emotions are also presented in Joker, as he has this complex and toxic relationship with Batman.

Later, Jim Gordon is holding a newspaper, and the headline is “Asylum security uproar maniac escapes again” (Moore, 2019, p. 19). The photo on the headline is not of the Joker, who would be the maniac who escapes; it is a photo of Batman. We can convey this in the following image:

Figure 3: Batman, the Maniac



Source: Moore (2019, p. 19)

In the following pages, the doctor talks about Barbara's situation as she wakes up. Barbara is the daughter of Commissioner Gordon, she is very injured and paraplegic because Joker went to her house shot her, and left her naked on the floor. Batman is with Barbara because he is Gordon's friend and wants to check what Joker has done.

On the first panel of page 24, it is possible to observe Batman holding the Joker's card in his hand, showing his obsession with him. On the 5th panel, we can see Batman crumpling the Joker's card in his hands. The 3rd, 4th, and 5th panels are narrow, giving the sensation of a fast movement of Batman crumpling the card. On the last panel, we have Batman's figure standing still and conveying a threat.

On these panels, we can see Batman with a serious facial expression: he does not express emotion to see Barbara awake; he is driven by anger. Artists often use facial expressions to communicate a character's emotions, and in this case, pain, fear, or confusion. Barbara's feelings are evident in her expression. She is traumatized by the Joker's actions, highlighting Joker's insanity.

Figure 4: Batman crumpling Joker's card



Source: Moore (2019, p. 24)

4.2 The Representation of the Joker

On pages 14 and 15, the author decides to present a flashback of the Joker's life, as he is very frustrated that he cannot provide for his family. There are fewer panels, so we can get this feeling of a more dramatic scene. Also, these pages are almost entirely black and white. The monochromatic palette contributes to the overall dark and moody atmosphere of the story. The absence of color enhances the sense of misfortune and adds to the psychological intensity of the narrative. The story deals with themes of insanity, tragedy, and the blurred line between good and evil, and the black-and-white imagery complements these themes. Only two elements are colored yellow, which are the elements of a lamp and food, which we can take as a metaphor. The light could be a metaphor for hope because it is a light in the darkness. And the food could be a metaphor for what he needs most, which is to feed his family. The dialogue on this page makes the reader perceive the guy, who will be Joker, as a father worried about his family: "You think I'm not worried about that?" (Moore, 2019, p.14). Throughout the following page, this man feels guilty and insufficient. This is shown in the following image:

Figure 6: The Joker's Feelings



15

Source: Moore (2019, p. 15)

On pages 22 & 23, we have fewer panels than the other pages for the Joker's backstory, so we can get this feeling of *a* more dramatic scene. On the sixth panel, it is possible to see the red hood for the first time. This element serves as a metaphor for the Joker's descent into madness. According to Kendra Cherry (2023),

[r]ed is also used to convey danger in a non-literal way. Some examples include using the phrase "in the red" to describe financial loss or "red flag" to indicate when something is wrong with a person or situation.

In this context, red symbolizes the chaos and madness in the Joker's inner character. This red hood can be observed as an element that represents the Joker's tragic past that defines his present. He talks about doing this one big crime only, which indicates that he is just doing

this for his family. Then, he highlights how committing a crime is terrible and how following his dreams led him to an absence of hope and despair. He says: “It’s like. I began as a lab assistant, right? Was a good job. Real good job. So what I did? I quit to become a Comedian I was so sure. So sure, I had Talent. So, you see, like, if I just do this one big crime” (Moore, 2019, p. 22).

On the fourth panel of page 23, one of the guys who is talking to the guy, who will be known as Joker in the future, is trying to convince him to commit a robbery to get money to raise his son and see his family, and pressures him to commit the crime, making him think about the future of his son. On the fifth panel, he talks about the reluctance to commit the crime, saying: “I mean, it’s just this once. Then I can switch neighborhoods and start a proper life” (Moore, 2019, p.23).

On the sixth and seventh panels, we have a prolepsis with the protagonist of this scene saying that his life will change completely after the day of the robbery: “And then starting from Saturday morning. I will be rich. I can imagine it. My life's going to be completely changed. Nothing's going to be the same. Not ever again” (Moore, 2019, p.23). This is a prolepsis for his life indeed changes, but not for the better. Also, on the seventh panel, we have a close-up of the Joker’s face to add more drama to the story, as Eisner (1985 p.20) says: “Facial expressions affecting the narrative requires a close up.”

On pages 26-28, the Joker kidnap Commissioner Gordon, take off his clothes, and humiliate him. He does this trying to prove a point that everyone can descend into madness under horrible circumstances. These pages have panels that give the impression of a slower narrative, causing a dramatic impact. This page also starts with a more color tone and a calmer scene and then it goes into shocking scenes on the last panels. The sequence of shocking scenes on the panels shows how insane the Joker is and how humiliated Commissioner Gordon is in that moment.

The following page continues with the suffering of Gordon. This page is arranged in a way that the panels are in different sizes, which conveys the rhythm and the chaotic feeling of this scene. The dialogue on the fifth and sixth panels shows what the Joker is trying to prove with this sadistic action. The Joker says to Gordon: “You’re doing what any sane man in your appalling circumstances would do. You’re going mad” (Moore, 2019, p.27). On the last panel of page 27, the Joker is sitting on a throne, and the panels are wider, which shows that he is one of the protagonists, because he is a central character in the story.

On the following page, it is time for the Joker to give a monologue about how his past is scary:

Remember? Oh, I wouldn't do that, remembering's dangerous. I find the past such a worrying, anxious place. [...] Memory so treacherous. One moment you're lost in a carnival of delights with poignant childhood aromas, the flashing neon in of puberty, all that sentimental candy floss. The next leads you somewhere you don't want to go, somewhere dark and cold, filled with a damp, ambiguous shape of things you hoped were forgotten. Memories can be vile, repulsive little brutes. Like children, I suppose, haha (Moore, 2019, p.28).

The first panel shows the facial expression of Jim Gordon, who is frightened and desperate. The second panel has a close-up of the Joker's mad facial expression so that the readers can feel this madness. To clarify more, we can observe the following image:

Figure 7: The Joker's Madness



Source: Moore (2019, p. 28)

As his backstory continues, the future Joker feels bad about lying to his wife: “The worst part, lying to Jeannie” (Moore, 2019, p. 29). Right after this, he receives the news that his wife died in an accident testing a baby bottle heater. He tries to give up the robbery, but he is threatened by the bandits, as they say: “What is happening tonight is no little thing. Nobody backing out now remains healthy, no exception” (Moore, 2019, p. 29).

Pages 36-39 continue to tell the Joker’s backstory. This is the last time in this graphic novel that we see the Joker’s backstory. In these pages, he goes to the robbery and falls into an acid tank. This is the apex of his bad days when he loses his sanity. On page 39, it is possible to observe three panels of him laughing uncontrollably, and at the end of this page, we have a wider panel with the Joker with his hands over his head and laughing insanely.

Based on the analysis of passages from the graphic novel we have carried out, now we can answer the research question, which will be done in the following section.

5 FINAL REMARKS

In our research and analysis of *The Killing Joke*, we observed that Alan Moore uses elements of the narrative to deconstruct and subvert the trope of the villain and the hero. To achieve this objective, we had a brief introduction to comics history, specifically *The Killing Joke*, and how it has been analyzed before by others researchers. After that, we discussed the history of the hero in comics, looking into all the characteristics necessary to be a superhero, according to Peter Coogan, in his book *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*. Also, to support some of the ideas brought by Coogan, we investigated *Comics as History, Comics as Literature*, by Anessa Ann Babic. Later on, in the research, we dived into the theory of comics and sequential art, which helped us to analyze the graphic novel and find the elements that were necessary to answer the research question: What elements of the narrative does the author use to deconstruct and subvert the trope of the villain?

It is possible now to answer the research question, stating that we could observe the elements of deconstruction in the narrative. In Alan Moore's "The Killing Joke," the representation of Batman undergoes a nuanced exploration, revealing layers of his character beyond the typical superhero archetype. The analysis of specific pages and panels illustrates how Moore (2019), in collaboration with the illustrator, employs visual elements and narrative choices to depict Batman in a way that challenges traditional superhero tropes. The portrayal of Batman's violence and intensity is a departure from the conventional image of a superhero committed to a strict moral code, especially the no-killing rule. The dialogue between Batman

and the Joker inside the asylum highlights Batman's internal struggle, and the use of the word "kill" repeatedly accentuates the potential for a darker, more violent side of the character. Batman's obsessive behavior, as depicted in the Batcave scenes, adds a psychological dimension to his character. The mirrored symbolism between Batman and the Joker suggests shared traumas and a thin line between sanity and madness. This graphic novel offers a unique perspective on Batman, utilizing visual and narrative techniques to subvert traditional superhero tropes. The exploration of Batman's psyche, moral dilemmas, and the open-ended conclusion contributes to a more nuanced and complex representation of the iconic character, making a deconstruction of the superhero archetype brought by Coogan (2006).

The representation of the Joker undergoes a profound exploration, deviating from traditional superhero narratives and subverting established tropes. After analyzing specific pages and panels we can perceive how Moore (2019), in collaboration with the illustrator, employs visual elements and narrative choices to depict the Joker as a complex and tragic character, challenging conventional perceptions of villains in superhero stories. The flashback sequences, particularly on pages 14-15, 22-23, and 36-39, provide insight into the Joker's origin and humanize him by showcasing his struggles and desperation. The monochromatic palette and selective use of color, such as the yellow elements representing hope and the necessities for his family, contribute to the psychological depth of the narrative. This approach challenges the simplistic dichotomy of good versus evil, inviting readers to empathize with the Joker's humanity and the circumstances that led to his descent into madness. The exploration of the Joker's past, marked by personal tragedy, challenges the typical portrayal of villains in superhero stories. His backstory becomes a poignant narrative, emphasizing the impact of external factors on an individual's psyche and choices. This graphic novel not only provides a unique perspective on Batman but also offers a compelling and tragic portrayal of the Joker. Through visual and narrative techniques, Moore (2019) subverts traditional superhero tropes, humanizing the Joker and presenting a character with depth, complexity, and a tragic backstory. This exploration and reversion of tropes in some aspects aligns with the evolving nature of superhero narratives, as discussed by Coogan (2006), and contributes to the graphic novel's lasting impact on the exploration of morality and sanity in the world of superheroes.

We hope that this work contributes to highlighting the importance of the graphic novel in literature as well as to encouraging research on graphic novels, especially if researchers want to work with Will Eisner and his theory of comics. We would also like to emphasize the importance of the work of Alan Moore and Brian Bolland.

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