

Arthur Fleck's Anxieties and Defense Mechanisms in *Joker* (2019)

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the anxieties and defense mechanisms experienced by the main character in *Joker* (2019), a psychological thriller that portrays the marginalization of individuals with mental illness. This film is interesting to analyze because it reflects real world issues, where people with mental illness are marginalized and mistreated by the society around them. The psychoanalysis theory of anxiety and defense mechanisms by Sigmund Freud is applied to analyse Arthur Fleck as the main character. He is a mentally unstable guy who works as a party clown. The findings show that Arthur's anxieties are due to the mistreatments he received from people around him. Arthur went through reality, neurotic, and moral anxieties in his life, mainly because of the child abuse, rejection, the threats of cutting his paycheck, and the fear of breaking the social and moral standards. In response to these anxieties, Arthur ego applies defense mechanisms of repression, displacement, and rationalization. Repression is used to handle his neurotic anxiety. Displacement is used to manage his reality anxiety. Rationalization is used to cope with his reality and moral anxieties. In conclusion, although a person with a mental illness faces more hostile situations causing anxieties, he can handle them by himself.

Keywords: anxiety, defense mechanism, mental illness, psychological thriller film

INTRODUCTION

The psychological thriller genre, deeply influenced by Gothic fiction, Freudian psychoanalysis, and psychological realism (Mecholsky, 2014), explores the complexities of the human psyche, particularly themes of identity, perception, and mental instability (Samarandova, 2024). Todd Phillips's *Joker* (2019) illustrates this genre through its portrayal of Arthur Fleck, a socially marginalized man suffering from mental illness. The film traces Arthur's psychological deterioration as he confronts social isolation, traumatic experiences, and internal conflicts, ultimately transforming into the infamous Joker. The film's depiction of mental instability, combined with its commentary on social neglect, makes it a compelling subject for psychoanalytic interpretation.

This article analyzes Arthur Fleck's psychological condition using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, focusing on the structural model of personality—id, ego, and superego, and the three types of anxiety: reality, neurotic, and moral, as well as ego defense mechanisms. According to Hall (1954), the id operates on the pleasure principle and seeks immediate gratification, the ego functions through the reality principle to mediate between the id and the external world, and the superego serves as the internalized moral authority. Freud's model explains that anxiety arises when the id, ego, and superego are in conflict. Freud (as cited in Hall, 1954) categorized anxiety into three types: reality anxiety, triggered by external threats; neurotic anxiety, arising from internal impulses of the id; and moral anxiety, emerging from guilt and shame associated with violating the superego's standards. Arthur experiences all three forms of anxiety throughout the film: fear of social rejection and job loss (reality anxiety), uncontrollable emotional responses (neurotic anxiety), and guilt from his morally condemned actions (moral anxiety). To manage these anxieties, Arthur employs several defense mechanisms. This study focuses on three: repression, where distressing thoughts are pushed out of consciousness; displacement, where emotional responses are redirected to safer targets; and

rationalization, where socially unacceptable behavior is justified with logical reasoning (Hall, 1954).

By examining *Joker* through a psychoanalytic lens, this article aims to reveal the psychological depth of Arthur Fleck's character and the film's broader social critique. It emphasizes the relation between individual psychopathology and social neglect, demonstrating how cultural stigma and marginalization contribute to the worsening of individual mental health. This analysis also seeks to contribute to broader discussions on how film can reflect, reinforce, or challenge societal perceptions of mental illness.

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The analyzes of the main character, Arthur Fleck in *Joker* (2019), will be divided into two sub-chapters which talked about his reality, neurotic, and moral anxiety, and the defense mechanisms he uses to cope with the anxieties which are repression, displacement, and rationalization.

Arthur Fleck's Anxieties

In *Joker* (2019), Arthur Fleck undergoes a series of psychologically distressing experiences that activate various forms of anxiety. His reality anxiety is primarily rooted in the fear of social rejection, isolation, and professional failure. His neurotic anxiety emerges from internal psychological instability, particularly his struggle to control intrusive thoughts and emotional responses linked to his deteriorating mental health. Meanwhile, his moral anxiety arises from the fear of violating social norms and ethical expectations, often accompanied by guilt and self-doubt. These overlapping anxieties reflect the internal and external pressures Arthur faces as he descends into psychological breakdown.

Arthur Fleck experienced reality anxieties in four events. His first reality anxiety comes from his fear of being mocked by the group of children for his appearance as a clown due to his job. Rather than confronting the children's insults, Arthur remains silent. It reflects his internalized awareness of the social rejection by the children, showing how external threats can provoke withdrawal. According to Freud, reality anxiety emerges from external threats perceived by the ego, in Arthur's case, the fear of ridicule from the children poses a real threat that triggers his anxiety. His second reality anxiety happens due to his fear of the consequences of losing the promotional sign. Losing the promotional sign can cause him to be fired from his job. It represents his external threat that triggers his reality anxiety. Arthur's third reality anxiety happened when he was scolded by a woman on the bus. This action from the woman caused Arthur to feel humiliated and ashamed. Rather than asserting himself, Arthur retreats by curling up in his seat—an act that signifies his internalized fear of social rejection and illustrates how the perceived threat from the mother's reaction activates his reality anxiety. His fourth reality anxiety happens when Arthur's boss threatens to reduce his paycheck because the promotional sign was lost. This threat represents a real and external threat that Arthur's ego recognizes. Rather than resolving the conflict, Arthur's powerlessness causes him to accept the threat, heightening his reality anxiety. This form of anxiety comes from concrete threats and dangers in the external world. These contacts with real-world hostility heighten Arthur's fear of social rejection and strengthen his sense of vulnerability, which contributes considerably to his increasing anxiety.



Figure 1 Arthur felt ashamed for playing with the child.
Source: Phillips, T. (2019) *Joker* [Film]. Warner Bros. Pictures.

In figure 1 Arthur's reality anxiety arises when a woman rejects him after he tries to entertain her child, seeking human connection. Arthur's harmless attempt at connection abruptly ends short when the mother shouts, "Will you please stop bothering my kid?" This public rejection makes Arthur feel humiliated and ashamed. Rather than defending himself, he withdraws, curling up in his seat, demonstrating his fear of social rejection and emphasizing how an external threat, the mother's annoyed reaction, causes him to experience reality anxiety. According to Freud, reality anxiety is caused by threats in the outside world seen by the ego; in this example, the woman's condemnation represents a real, immediate threat to Arthur's sense of security and belonging, triggering his anxiety.

Although Arthur's anxieties mainly come from real external threats, Arthur also experienced neurotic anxiety which rooted in his internal insecurity because of his mental illness. According to Hall (1954), neurotic anxiety can happen when the id's instinct is overwhelming the ego, which can result in some impulsive action. Arthur's neurotic anxiety is his inappropriate and uncontrollable laughter during tense or stressful situations. This uncontrollable laughter reflects his unconscious fear of losing control of his impulses, which is a symptom of neurotic anxiety according to Freud's theories. Arthur's first neurotic anxiety can be seen through his uncontrollable laughter when he was reprimanded by the woman on the bus. Despite his real intention of only trying to entertain the child, when scolded by the mother Arthur burst into laughter and was unable to control himself. This sudden reaction from the mother caused Arthur to enter a state of panic. His ego which is overwhelmed by the id's desire for connection when faced with the reality manifests in the uncontrollable laughter. Arthur's second neurotic anxiety happened when he witnessed a woman being harassed in the subway. Arthur is paralyzed unable to help the woman and begins to laugh uncontrollably, drawing the attention of the people who harassed the woman. The laughter reflects Arthur's panic and the conflict between his id which is the desire to help and his ego that recognizes the danger, where the fear acting on impulses leads to irrational behaviour. Next his third neurotic anxiety happens when Thomas Wayne rejects Arthur's claim for being his son, revealing that Arthur was adopted. Confronted with the truth caused him to enter a panic state where he tries to deny Thomas' statement but fails and starts to laugh uncontrollably. His panic shows his fear of losing control, which causes neurotic anxiety. Arthur's fourth neurotic anxiety is shown through his reaction when he finds the truth in Penny's medical report. The shocking truth from the report causes him to panic which results in the laughter. Arthur's unexpected, inappropriate outbursts regularly come at socially unsuitable times, causing condemnation and resentment from people around him.



Figure 2 Arthur uncontrollable laughter happens because of what might happen in the subway.
Source: Phillips, T. (2019) *Joker* [Film]. Warner Bros. Pictures.

Arthur's uncontrollable laughter signals a state of panic, a reaction that subverts typical human instinct when confronted with such a distressing situation. Rather than seeking, intervening, or staying silent he burst into laughter, drawing the attention to himself. This involuntary response reflects his internal anxiety, rooted in the conflict between the id and the ego. His id, driven by the instinctual desire to help the woman, clashes with his ego, which recognizes the potential danger of intervening. Overwhelmed by this internal tension, the ego fails to regulate the impulse effectively, resulting in an irrational, uncontrollable outburst of laughter.

Arthur's third type of anxiety manifests as moral anxiety, revealed through three significant moments in the film. Moral anxiety arises from a fear of breaking social and ethical norms, which causes feelings of shame and internal struggle when one's behaviors violate social standards (Hall, 1954). Arthur's initial experience of moral anxiety emerges following the killing of the three young men in the subway. Despite the act being driven by self-defense, it generates significant internal conflict and emotional distress. This can be seen in the way Arthur reacts after the killing by saying "Shi...shi—" while his ears are ringing. This statement reflects his superego punishment, which manifests in an intense guilt. Arthur's second moral anxiety happens when he runs to a bathroom after the killing. Arthur escaping to a bathroom shows his fear of being caught and punished. This fear reflects his superego's condemnation of his action, which triggers his moral anxiety. Arthur's third moral anxiety is shown when Arthur was offered a gun by Randall. Randall argues that the gun is for Arthur's protection, but Arthur on the other hand understands that carrying a gun is both illegal and morally wrong by saying "I'm not supposed to have a gun." Arthur's fear of doing something wrong and going against the social standards represents his moral anxiety. Arthur Fleck's anxiety is most clearly triggered by his violent actions, such as murdering the young guys on the subway and taking Randall's gun. Arthur realizes that these acts violate social and moral standards, causing significant mental conflict. These moral conflict moments illustrate Arthur's awareness of what is right and wrong, as well as the friction between his need for self-protection and his understanding of moral principles.



Figure 3 Arthur's moral anxiety heightened after he killed three young men
Source: Phillips, T. (2019) *Joker* [Film]. Warner Bros. Pictures.

The event of killing the three young men causes Arthur to be anxious. Arthur's statement in response to the killing by saying "Shit... shi-", proves that he realized that he had violated the moral norms by killing the young men. Arthur's id which desires for power after years of humiliation and helplessness. However, his superego, after the killing of the three young men, begins to punish the ego. The punishment is reflected through the intense guilt, which can be seen and heard by sweating and buzzing in the ears. Arthur's statement immediately after the killing also reflects his ego's reaction to the punitive demands of the superego, which manifest as intense guilt. He is overwhelmed by fear in response to his actions, recognizing that he has violated internalized moral norms. Although the initial act of violence may be interpreted as self-defense in response to the beating he endured, the psychological consequences reveal a deeper moral conflict.

Arthur Fleck's Defense Mechanisms

The analysis of Arthur Fleck's defense mechanisms reveals the psychological strategies he employs to cope with his overwhelming anxieties. Freud defined defense mechanisms as unconscious tactics used by the ego to control anxiety, typically in dysfunctional or destructive ways. In *Joker* (2019), Arthur uses a variety of coping mechanisms to relieve himself from distress, including repression, displacement, and rationalization. These techniques allow him to momentarily escape the painful emotions caused by his reality, neurotic, and moral anxieties; however, they also contribute to his increasing instability and detachment from reality.

Arthur's first defense mechanism is repression, which functions by unconsciously pushing distressing memories and impulses out of conscious awareness to protect the ego from overwhelming anxiety. This mechanism is evident when his coworker Randall asks about the beating Arthur experienced. Arthur dismissively replies, "It was just a bunch of kids. I should've left it alone." This reflects repression, as his ego attempts to suppress the painful memory and vulnerability in order to maintain psychological stability. Furthermore, his repression can be seen in the scene where Arthur is scolded by the woman on the bus. Instead of acknowledging his emotion or defending himself, he responds with uncontrollable laughter. This inappropriate emotional reaction signals a defensive repression of his true feelings—specifically, the pain of social rejection—which the ego keeps from entering conscious awareness.

Arthur also exhibits displacement as a defense mechanism to manage his overwhelming anxieties and repressed aggression. In Freudian theory, displacement involves redirecting emotional impulses—particularly anger or frustration—from a threatening or unacceptable

source onto a safer substitute. This process allows the ego to release built-up tension without directly confronting the main source of anxiety. One instance of displacement happens when Arthur's boss falsely accuses him of stealing a promotional sign. Unable to confront his boss due to his boss representing the powerful figure and fear of further repercussions, Arthur channels his anger by violently kicking and stomping a trash can. The trash can serve as a non-threatening target, allowing him to express his suppressed rage, sparing him from further consequences. His second example arises after Arthur realizes that Randall manipulated him into accepting a gun, an act that ultimately leads to Arthur being fired from his job. Rather than confronting Randall directly, Arthur displaces his anger onto a clock-in device, repeatedly punching it until it breaks. These actions illustrate how Arthur's ego attempts to mediate internal conflict and anxiety through displacement, allowing for emotional release while avoiding direct confrontation with the real source of distress.



Figure 5 Arthur kicking and stomping the trash
Source: Phillips, T. (2019) *Joker* [Film]. Warner Bros. Pictures.

Arthur is unable to confront his boss, Hoyt, who represents a figure of authority and power. Although Hoyt is the immediate source of Arthur's emotional distress—accusing him unjustly and undermining his credibility—Arthur cannot express his anger directly due to the hierarchical power dynamic and fear of repercussions. As a result, he displaces his repressed anger onto a safer, non-threatening object: a trash can outside the building. He violently kicks and assaults it, using it as a substitute outlet for his frustration. This act of displacement reflects Arthur's unconscious attempt to manage the intense emotions he cannot direct toward their true source, revealing his internal conflict and the ego's effort to protect him from further consequences.

Arthur's use of rationalization as a defense mechanism appears as a reaction to the overwhelming reality and moral anxieties caused by his experiences with abuse, betrayal, and humiliation. Rationalization is a psychological defense mechanism in which an attempt to justify an unacceptable behaviour, explains their thoughts, or feelings using a logic based explanation (Hall, 1954). Arthur uses rationalization in three events in the film. Arthur's first rationalization happens when he kills Penny Fleck, after realizing that Penny lied to him and had abused him when he was a child. Arthur's statement "I haven't been happy one minute in my entire fucking life" illustrates how Arthur convinces himself that killing her as a form of liberation from Penny's betrayal. Arthur's ego creates an acceptable explanation for his morally unacceptable action. Arthur's second rationalization happened when he admits to have killed the three young men in the subway. Arthur stated "I killed those guys because they were awful. Everybody's awful these days." Arthur frames the young people as deserving of their fate, by constructing a narrative that he is the victim, excusing his violent behaviour. His third rationalization happens when Arthur shot Murray Franklin on live television. Arthur's statement

“Playing my video, inviting me on the show. You just wanted to make fun of me. You just like the rest of them.” Arthur accuses Murray of humiliating him by playing his stand-up routine. Arthur justifies Murray's death as deserving and framing it as a rightful response to the mistreatment.



Figure 6 Arthur confronts and kills Penny Fleck
Source: Phillips, T. (2019) *Joker* [Film]. Warner Bros. Pictures.

Arthur is overwhelmed by a profound sense of betrayal and resentment toward his mother, having spent his entire life believing in the narrative she constructed—that he was special, loved, and even the son of Thomas Wayne. The truth that these beliefs were false shatters his psychological foundation, intensifying his feelings of abandonment and emotional confusion. As a result, Penny's long-standing emotional neglect and abuse become a significant source of Arthur's anxiety. In an effort to manage this internal turmoil, Arthur employs rationalization as a defense mechanism. He attempts to justify the killing of Penny by convincing himself that her death is necessary for his psychological liberation—that by eliminating her, he can sever ties with the false identity imposed upon him and reclaim control over his sense of self.

CONCLUSION

Joker (2019) presents Arthur Fleck as a character who suffers from all three types of anxiety identified in Freud's psychoanalytic theory: reality, neurotic, and moral anxiety. His reality anxiety stems from external threats such as social rejection, public humiliation, and job insecurity. In contrast, his neurotic and moral anxiety arise from internal psychological conflicts between the id, ego, and superego. To cope with these overwhelming anxieties, Arthur unconsciously employs several defense mechanisms, particularly repression, displacement, and rationalization.

Arthur's reality anxiety is triggered by constant social and professional failures. He experiences neurotic anxiety when the internal tension becomes too overwhelming, such as in moments of involuntary laughter, which signals the ego's inability to mediate between desire and fear. His moral anxiety emerges when he feels guilt or shame for violating internalized moral standards. To manage these emotions, Arthur resorts to repression by pushing painful memories out of consciousness, displacement by redirecting anger to less threatening targets, and rationalization by justifying his socially and morally unacceptable actions.

From an academic standpoint, this psychoanalytic analysis not only offers a deeper understanding of Arthur's character but also highlights the film's psychological depth and social relevance. *Joker* becomes more than just a psychological thriller—it serves as a mirror reflecting the impact of systemic neglect, social alienation, and mental health stigma. Analyzing such a complex character through Freud's framework is both intellectually engaging and socially meaningful, showing how film can be a powerful medium for exploring the human psyche.

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