

An Analysis of the Anti-hero Portrayed in Joker (2019) Movie by Todd Phillips

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study analyzes how Arthur Fleck is portrayed as an anti-hero in Todd Phillips's Joker (2019) by clarifying the conceptual distinction between an anti-hero, a villain, a protagonist, and a psychologically vulnerable character.

Research Method: A qualitative research design was employed using textual and visual analysis. Data were collected from selected scenes and dialogues through repeated viewing, qualitative coding based on Abrams' (1999) anti-hero framework, and close analysis of cinematography, mise-en-scène, framing, lighting, sound, editing, and characterization.

Results and Discussion: The findings reveal that Arthur Fleck is represented as a morally ambiguous anti-hero whose characterization is primarily reflected through three dominant traits: fragility, ineffectuality, and loneliness. These characteristics become anti-heroic through their interaction with Arthur's moral choices, narrative centrality, and audiovisual representation rather than through psychological vulnerability alone.

Implications: The study offers a clearer framework for analyzing anti-heroes in contemporary cinema.

Originality: It integrates Abrams' anti-hero theory with systematic textual and visual analysis, extending previous studies that primarily emphasized plot or psychological interpretation.

Keywords: anti-hero; arthur fleck; characterization; Joker (2019); textual and visual analysis.

1. Introduction

Literary work is the structure of a fictional world, meaning that the reality represented in literary works is fictional rather than identical to empirical reality. Even though literature is fictional, it still refers to realities that exist in the real world. Movies likewise represent various dimensions of human life by depicting social experiences, individual identities, and collective problems through audiovisual narratives. Villarejo (2013) pointed out that the power of film lies in its ability to organize time and movement while revealing meanings related to politics, psychology, philosophy, aesthetics, personal experience, industry, and technology. According to Klarer (2023), film is a semi-textual form that is influenced by literature and literary criticism while simultaneously developing its own aesthetic

characteristics. Therefore, despite possessing distinctive cinematic conventions, films remain appropriate objects of literary analysis because they employ narrative structures, characterization, symbolism, and thematic development comparable to those found in literary works.

In contemporary cinema, one of the most significant developments in characterization is the emergence of morally ambiguous protagonists who challenge the conventional distinction between heroes and villains. Unlike traditional heroes, whose actions are guided by courage, justice, and moral integrity, contemporary protagonists frequently display ethical contradictions, psychological vulnerability, and socially deviant behavior while remaining the narrative center of the story. This development has increased scholarly attention toward the concept of the anti-hero. However, the term "anti-hero" is often used interchangeably with villain, antagonist, tragic figure, or psychologically vulnerable character, resulting in conceptual ambiguity within literary and film studies. Such ambiguity makes it difficult to determine whether a character should be interpreted as an anti-hero because of narrative construction, moral ambiguity, psychological condition, or criminal behavior. Consequently, a clearer conceptual distinction is required before analyzing anti-hero representation in contemporary films.

Maryani (2017) stated that the anti-hero introduces a distinctive type of character in literary works because the anti-hero cannot simply be categorized as either a conventional hero or a villain. Brombert (1999) further explained that anti-heroes are frequently portrayed as weak, ineffective, unhappy, and socially marginalized individuals. Wilson *et al.*, (2013) suggested that anti-heroes perceive the world from unconventional perspectives, leading them to respond to conflict differently from traditional heroes. Abrams (1993) defined the anti-hero as the principal character of a modern literary work who lacks the admirable qualities normally associated with heroic figures. Unlike a protagonist, which refers only to the central character in the narrative, or an antagonist, which functions as the opposing force within the story, an anti-hero is defined primarily by the absence of conventional heroic virtues despite remaining the audience's central point of identification. Likewise, a villain is generally characterized by destructive intentions and moral opposition, whereas a psychologically vulnerable or tragic character may experience suffering without necessarily becoming an anti-hero. Therefore, psychological trauma, loneliness, social exclusion, or even criminal behavior alone cannot automatically establish anti-hero status unless these characteristics are understood within their broader narrative and moral context.

Abrams (1993) further explained that anti-heroes differ fundamentally from conventional heroes because they do not possess qualities traditionally associated with heroism, such as courage, nobility, moral integrity, or exceptional strength. Instead, anti-heroes often exhibit characteristics that reflect personal weakness, moral ambiguity, and social alienation. Abrams classified anti-hero characterization into seven possible traits, namely petty, referring to excessive concern with trivial matters; ignominious, referring to shameful or dishonorable conduct; passive, referring to the tendency to accept circumstances without meaningful resistance; ineffectual, referring to the inability to accomplish intended goals; dishonest, referring to deceptive behavior; fragile, referring to emotional or psychological vulnerability; and lonely, referring to social and emotional isolation. However, these characteristics should not be interpreted as independent indicators of anti-heroism. Rather, they function as analytical dimensions through which a character's anti-heroic identity can be examined in relation to narrative agency, moral choices, and the absence of conventional heroic values. Consequently, the presence of loneliness, fragility, or psychological suffering alone does not necessarily

establish a character as an anti-hero unless these traits are accompanied by morally ambiguous actions and a narrative position that continues to place the character at the center of audience engagement.

Todd Phillips's *Joker* (2019) provides an important case for examining this theoretical issue because Arthur Fleck is portrayed as a socially marginalized individual who experiences repeated humiliation, psychological distress, and institutional neglect while simultaneously developing into a perpetrator of extreme violence. Arthur occupies a complex narrative position: he is the film's protagonist because the story is told primarily from his perspective, yet many of his actions violate conventional moral standards and resemble those commonly associated with villainous characters. At the same time, his traumatic experiences and psychological vulnerability invite audience sympathy without fully justifying his violent behavior. This moral and narrative ambiguity distinguishes Arthur from a traditional hero, a conventional villain, or merely a psychologically vulnerable character, making *Joker* (2019) an appropriate object for investigating how anti-hero characteristics are constructed and represented through cinematic narrative. Therefore, this study does not seek to determine whether Arthur is simply a hero or a villain, but rather to examine how his characterization reflects the complexity of anti-heroism within the framework proposed by Abrams (1993).

Previous studies have examined Arthur Fleck from various theoretical perspectives, demonstrating that his characterization has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Asha (2022) analyzed Arthur Fleck using Abrams' theory of the anti-hero. She identified seven potential anti-hero characteristics, concluding that fragility, ineffectuality, and loneliness were the dominant traits represented in *Joker* (2019). Their study provides an important foundation for understanding Arthur's anti-heroic characterization through intrinsic narrative elements. Other scholars have approached Arthur from psychological perspectives. Skryabin (2021) associated Arthur's behavior with narcissistic personality disorder and pseudobulbar affect resulting from traumatic experiences, while Saud & Mahajani (2022) argued that Arthur's inability to fulfill physiological, safety, love, belonging, and esteem needs contributed significantly to his transformation into the Joker. More recent studies also explain Arthur's character through trauma, childhood abuse, social exclusion, and systemic neglect (Dewi *et al.*, 2025; Nyfors, 2025). Meanwhile, Negara (2024) identified bullying, physical appearance, family rejection, and social isolation as major determinants of Arthur's character development. In contrast, Putra *et al.*, (2024) highlighted Arthur's moral complexity by arguing that he initially demonstrates values associated with defending marginalized people before gradually developing antagonistic tendencies. Collectively, these studies indicate that Arthur Fleck represents one of the most complex contemporary cinematic characters because his transformation involves psychological, social, and moral dimensions rather than a simple transition from hero to villain.

Although these studies have contributed substantially to understanding Arthur Fleck's character, several important limitations remain. First, previous studies generally examine Arthur either through psychological approaches or by classifying his anti-hero characteristics without adequately distinguishing the theoretical boundaries between anti-hero, protagonist, antagonist, villain, tragic figure, and psychologically vulnerable character. Consequently, Arthur is frequently described using these concepts interchangeably despite their different narrative and moral functions. Second, existing studies predominantly emphasize Arthur's vulnerability, loneliness, trauma, or social marginalization while providing limited discussion of how these characteristics interact with his moral choices, violent actions, and narrative agency in constructing anti-heroism. Third, analyses of *Joker* primarily rely on plot description and dialogue interpretation. In contrast, the contribution of cinematic elements—including framing, mise-en-scène, lighting, performance, sound, editing, and visual symbolism—to the

construction of Arthur's anti-hero identity has received relatively limited scholarly attention. These limitations demonstrate that a more integrated textual and visual analysis is required to explain why Arthur Fleck should be interpreted specifically as an anti-hero rather than merely as a psychologically vulnerable protagonist or a conventional villain.

Based on these limitations, this study seeks to answer the following research question: How are Arthur Fleck's dominant anti-hero characteristics represented through the textual and audiovisual construction of Joker (2019), and how do these characteristics distinguish him from a conventional hero, villain, antagonist, tragic figure, or psychologically vulnerable protagonist? Accordingly, this study aims to analyze the representation of Arthur Fleck's anti-hero characterization by focusing consistently on the three dominant characteristics identified through Abrams' framework, namely fragility, ineffectuality, and loneliness, while examining how these characteristics are reinforced through narrative structure and cinematic techniques. The novelty of this study lies in integrating literary theory with close textual and visual analysis to clarify the conceptual boundaries of anti-heroism and to explain how Arthur's moral ambiguity is constructed through both characterization and audiovisual representation rather than through psychological suffering alone. This study is expected to contribute to literary and film studies by providing a more comprehensive analytical framework for interpreting morally ambiguous protagonists in contemporary cinema.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides a literature review and hypothesis development. Section 3 presents the research method and design. Section 4 provides the results and discussion. Section 5 presents concluding remarks and Recommendations.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1 Characterization Theory

Characterization is one of the fundamental elements of narrative construction because it shapes how audiences understand a character's identity, motivation, behavior, and development throughout a story. Rather than functioning merely as fictional figures, characters operate as narrative agents whose actions drive plot progression, establish conflict, and communicate thematic meanings. In contemporary film studies, characterization is understood as a dynamic process through which audiences gradually construct their understanding of a character by integrating dialogue, actions, emotional expressions, visual appearance, interpersonal relationships, and cinematic representation (Smith, 2022a, 2022b). Myers (2022) further argues that character-driven storytelling places the protagonist at the center of narrative development, where internal conflicts and personal transformation become the primary force that advances the story. Consequently, characterization should not be interpreted simply as a collection of personality traits but as a narrative process that continuously develops through the interaction between character agency, conflict, and audience interpretation. This perspective is reinforced by Bergman & Franzén (2022), who explain that fictional characters function as meaningful narrative entities whose significance emerges from their role within the fictional discourse rather than from isolated psychological attributes. Therefore, characterization represents the integration of narrative function, characterization techniques, and audience interpretation in constructing the meaning of a fictional character.

The effectiveness of characterization depends not only on the information provided by the narrative but also on how audiences cognitively and emotionally identify with fictional characters. Smith

(2022a) explains that viewers actively construct character understanding through a continuous process of recognition, alignment, and emotional engagement, enabling them to evaluate a character's intentions and moral decisions within the narrative. Likewise, Felnhofer *et al.*, (2023) demonstrate that character identification is significantly influenced by narrative transportation, immersive experience, and audience interaction with the story world, indicating that characterization extends beyond textual description into emotional and psychological engagement. Similarly, Tchernev (2022) found that protagonists' motivations strongly influence audience identification and affect viewers' real-time emotional responses toward narrative events. From a narratological perspective, LeBlanc (2022) emphasizes that characterization is also shaped by narrative perspective because narration determines how much information audiences receive about a character's thoughts, emotions, and motivations. Accordingly, characterization in film should be understood as a multidimensional process involving narrative structure, characterization techniques, audiovisual representation, and audience interpretation rather than merely describing observable character traits. Such an understanding is particularly important in contemporary cinema, where characters frequently display moral ambiguity and psychological complexity that challenge conventional classifications.

Characterization theory also provides the conceptual foundation for distinguishing different narrative roles and character constructions before examining more specific categories such as the anti-hero. Myers (2022) argues that protagonists are defined primarily by their narrative centrality rather than by moral superiority, indicating that the central character of a story is not necessarily heroic. This distinction becomes increasingly relevant in contemporary films, where protagonists often combine conflicting moral, psychological, and social characteristics. Hagelin & Silverman (2022) observe that modern audiovisual narratives increasingly construct protagonists whose ethical ambiguity, emotional vulnerability, and disruptive behavior challenge traditional heroic conventions, thereby expanding the range of characterization in contemporary storytelling. Similarly, Henderson & Reynolds (2023) demonstrate that fictional narratives construct characters through interactions between personal attributes, social contexts, and narrative functions, while Carter (2022) argues that meaningful stories encourage audiences to critically interpret characters as representations of broader human experiences rather than as fixed moral categories. Building upon these perspectives, the present study conceptualizes characterization as a dynamic interaction among narrative function, character development, audience identification, and audiovisual representation. This theoretical foundation is essential for analyzing Arthur Fleck's characterization in *Joker* (2019) before examining whether his narrative construction fulfills the conceptual criteria of an anti-hero as discussed in the following section.

2.2 Anti-Hero Theory

The concept of the anti-hero has become one of the most significant developments in contemporary literary and film studies because it challenges the traditional assumption that the central character must embody moral virtue and heroic ideals. Unlike the classical hero, whose actions are generally motivated by courage, justice, and self-sacrifice, the anti-hero occupies a morally ambiguous position in which ethical imperfection, personal vulnerability, and social alienation coexist with narrative centrality. Although anti-heroic figures have appeared throughout literary history, the term gained greater prominence in modern and postmodern narratives, where protagonists increasingly reflect social uncertainty, psychological complexity, and ideological conflict rather than idealized heroism. Contemporary scholarship argues that anti-heroes should not be understood simply as immoral

protagonists but as characters who disrupt conventional expectations regarding morality, authority, and social order while remaining the principal focus of audience engagement (Altinordu, 2025; Hagelin & Silverman, 2022). Rather than celebrating virtue, anti-heroes often expose the contradictions, failures, and anxieties of the societies in which they exist, making them particularly relevant to contemporary audiovisual narratives.

Abrams (1993) defines the anti-hero as the principal character in a modern literary work who differs fundamentally from the conventional hero because he or she lacks qualities traditionally associated with heroism, including courage, dignity, moral excellence, and extraordinary strength. Instead, anti-heroes may be characterized by weakness, moral uncertainty, passivity, dishonesty, emotional fragility, loneliness, or social inadequacy. Abrams further identifies seven characteristics frequently associated with anti-heroic characterization, namely petty, ignominious, passive, ineffectual, dishonest, fragile, and lonely. However, these characteristics should not be interpreted as isolated personality traits that automatically establish anti-hero status. Recent scholarship emphasizes that anti-heroism emerges from the interaction between characterization, narrative function, and moral ambiguity rather than from psychological suffering or criminal behavior alone. Hagelin & Silverman (2022) argue that anti-heroes are positioned against dominant social expectations by rejecting conventional models of virtue and responsibility, while Altinordu (2025) explains that the modern anti-hero functions as a disruptive figure whose ambiguity intentionally blurs the boundaries separating heroism, villainy, and social rebellion. Consequently, anti-heroism should be understood as a narrative construction in which morally questionable actions coexist with sustained audience identification, thereby distinguishing anti-heroes from conventional heroes, villains, antagonists, or merely psychologically vulnerable characters.

This conceptual distinction is particularly important for the present study because Arthur Fleck in *Joker* (2019) occupies multiple narrative positions that can easily be conflated if anti-heroism is not clearly defined. As the central character, Arthur functions as the protagonist because the narrative is primarily organized around his experiences and perspective. Nevertheless, many of his actions involve deliberate violence and moral transgression commonly associated with villainous characters. At the same time, his traumatic childhood, psychological instability, and social exclusion position him as a vulnerable individual who evokes audience sympathy without necessarily justifying his destructive behavior. Therefore, neither protagonist status, psychological suffering, nor criminal conduct alone is sufficient to classify Arthur as an anti-hero. Instead, his characterization must be evaluated through the interaction between his narrative centrality, moral ambiguity, exercise of agency, and rejection of conventional heroic values, consistent with Abrams' theoretical framework and contemporary interpretations of anti-heroism (Abrams, 1999; Hagelin & Silverman, 2022). Based on this framework, the present study employs Abrams' seven anti-hero characteristics as the primary analytical categories while focusing empirically on the three dominant characteristics identified in Arthur Fleck's characterization—fragility, ineffectuality, and loneliness—to explain how these traits are constructed through the film's narrative and audiovisual representation rather than being treated merely as indicators of psychological vulnerability.

3. Research Method

This study employed a qualitative research design because the objective was to examine how Arthur Fleck is represented as an anti-hero in *Joker* (2019) through both narrative and audiovisual construction. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the research sought to interpret meanings embedded in cinematic representation rather than to measure variables quantitatively. More specifically, this study adopted a textual and visual analysis design, enabling the researchers to examine dialogue, characterization, narrative structure, and cinematic elements that collectively construct Arthur Fleck's anti-heroic identity. The analytical framework was primarily based on Abrams' (1999) theory of the anti-hero, while concepts of characterization and cinematic representation presented in the literature review were used to interpret how anti-hero characteristics were communicated through the film.

The primary data consisted of Todd Phillips's *Joker* (2019), released by Warner Bros. Pictures. The unit of analysis comprised individual scenes containing Arthur Fleck as the principal character, including spoken dialogue, character interactions, visual composition, and cinematic techniques. Data collection was conducted through repeated viewing of the film to ensure analytical consistency. Unlike the preliminary observation conducted during the initial viewing, subsequent viewings focused on identifying scenes that fulfilled predetermined analytical criteria. A scene was selected only when it satisfied at least one of the following conditions: (1) it explicitly represented one or more anti-hero characteristics proposed by Abrams (1999); (2) it illustrated Arthur Fleck's moral decision-making, agency, or transformation; or (3) it contained significant audiovisual elements—including framing, camera movement, *mise-en-scène*, lighting, costume, facial expression, sound, editing, or visual symbolism—that contributed to constructing Arthur's characterization. Each selected scene was documented using its approximate timestamp, dialogue transcription, scene description, and corresponding anti-hero indicator to facilitate systematic analysis and improve the transparency of the research procedure.

The collected data were organized through a qualitative coding procedure. First, all selected scenes were transcribed and cataloged according to their timestamps. Second, open coding was conducted by identifying visual and textual evidence relevant to Abrams' seven anti-hero characteristics, namely petty, ignominious, passive, ineffectual, dishonest, fragile, and lonely. Third, axial coding was employed to compare recurring patterns across scenes and to determine which characteristics consistently represented Arthur Fleck's characterization throughout the narrative. The analysis revealed that only three characteristics—fragility, ineffectuality, and loneliness—were consistently dominant. In contrast, passivity appeared only as a supporting characteristic and was therefore not classified as one of the principal findings. This procedure ensured consistency between the analytical framework, findings, abstract, and conclusion.

Data analysis was conducted using an interpretive textual and visual analysis. Textual analysis examined dialogue, narrative context, character interaction, and Arthur Fleck's actions to understand how anti-hero characteristics were expressed within the story. Visual analysis examined cinematic techniques, including framing, camera distance and movement, *mise-en-scène*, lighting, costume, color composition, facial expression, performance, sound design, editing, and recurring visual symbolism. Rather than merely describing plot events, each selected scene was interpreted by relating textual and audiovisual evidence to Abrams' anti-hero framework. Particular attention was given to explaining how

Arthur's vulnerability, moral ambiguity, violent decisions, and narrative centrality distinguished him from a conventional hero, villain, antagonist, tragic figure, or merely a psychologically vulnerable protagonist.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, interpretive validation was performed through repeated comparison between dialogue, visual evidence, and the theoretical framework. Every interpretation was required to be supported by at least one dialogue excerpt and one visual observation from the same scene before being categorized as evidence of anti-hero characterization. The coding results were reviewed repeatedly throughout the analysis to ensure that the interpretation remained consistent across all selected scenes and corresponded with the research objective. Finally, the findings were synthesized to explain how Arthur Fleck's anti-hero identity was constructed through the interaction between characterization, narrative development, and cinematic representation in *Joker* (2019).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Analysis Results

The analysis demonstrates that Arthur Fleck is represented as an anti-hero in Todd Phillips's *Joker* (2019) through the interaction between characterization, narrative function, and audiovisual representation. Rather than depicting Arthur as a conventional hero or a purely villainous character, the film constructs him as a morally ambiguous protagonist whose psychological vulnerability, social marginalization, and increasingly violent moral choices challenge traditional heroic conventions. Following the analytical framework proposed by Abrams (1999), seven anti-hero characteristics were initially employed as coding categories. However, the analysis revealed that only three characteristics—fragility, ineffectuality, and loneliness—consistently emerged as Arthur Fleck's dominant anti-heroic traits. Although passivity appeared in several early scenes, it functioned only as a supporting characteristic and therefore was not classified as one of the principal findings. This analytical decision ensures consistency between the methodology, findings, abstract, and conclusion.

The findings further indicate that these three dominant characteristics should not be interpreted as isolated psychological conditions. Instead, they function as interconnected narrative components that gradually transform Arthur from a socially marginalized protagonist into a morally ambiguous anti-hero. His emotional fragility exposes his inability to cope with repeated humiliation and institutional neglect; his ineffectuality reflects his repeated failure to achieve social recognition through legitimate means; and his loneliness illustrates his profound social isolation and inability to establish meaningful interpersonal relationships. Importantly, these characteristics alone do not establish Arthur's anti-hero status. Rather, Arthur becomes an anti-hero because these vulnerabilities interact with his exercise of agency, his increasingly violent moral decisions, and the narrative's continued alignment with his perspective despite the ethical consequences of his actions. Consequently, Arthur should be distinguished from a conventional villain, whose primary narrative function is to oppose the protagonist, and from a psychologically vulnerable character, whose suffering does not necessarily result in morally ambiguous agency.

Accordingly, the following discussion is organized around the three dominant anti-hero characteristics identified in the analysis. Each characteristic is examined through close textual and visual analysis by integrating dialogue, narrative context, cinematography, mise-en-scène, lighting, framing, sound, performance, editing, and visual symbolism. Rather than merely recounting the film's plot, the

analysis explains how these cinematic elements collectively construct Arthur Fleck's anti-hero identity and why his characterization fulfills Abrams' conceptual framework while remaining distinct from traditional heroic and villainous representations.

4.1.1 *Fragility as the Foundation of Arthur Fleck's Anti-Heroic Characterization*

Arthur Fleck's most dominant anti-hero characteristic is his emotional and psychological fragility, which is consistently represented throughout the film before his transformation into the Joker. Within Abrams' (1999) framework, fragility refers to a condition of emotional vulnerability in which a character lacks psychological resilience when confronted with social pressure, humiliation, or repeated failure. However, in *Joker* (2019), Arthur's fragility is not presented merely as an individual psychological weakness. Instead, it functions as the narrative foundation from which his anti-heroic transformation gradually develops. His vulnerability repeatedly places him in situations where he becomes the object of humiliation, institutional neglect, and interpersonal betrayal, while simultaneously encouraging audiences to sympathize with his suffering. This sustained alignment between the audience and Arthur distinguishes him from a conventional villain, whose destructive actions are rarely introduced through prolonged experiences of vulnerability and marginalization.

One of the earliest scenes illustrating Arthur's fragility occurs during his performance as a street clown, when a group of teenagers steals his advertising sign and lures him into an alley before physically assaulting him (approximately 00:03:30–00:05:20). Rather than emphasizing physical violence alone, the sequence employs several cinematic techniques to communicate Arthur's psychological helplessness. Medium and long shots repeatedly isolate Arthur from the surrounding urban environment, visually reinforcing his social exclusion. The dim lighting, muted color palette, and deteriorating streets of Gotham further strengthen the impression that Arthur occupies a neglected social space. During the assault, the camera remains relatively distant instead of adopting dynamic action shots, allowing viewers to observe Arthur's inability to defend himself rather than encouraging excitement toward the violence. Arthur's body language—his defensive posture, limited physical resistance, and subdued facial expression—communicates resignation instead of retaliation. Consequently, the scene represents more than a simple act of bullying; it establishes Arthur's emotional fragility as a defining element of his characterization. His inability to respond does not yet reflect moral weakness or villainy but rather illustrates the vulnerability that later becomes the psychological foundation of his anti-heroic identity.

Arthur's fragility becomes more evident through his interaction with Randall, a co-worker who offers him a handgun after learning about the assault. Initially, Randall appears sympathetic, encouraging Arthur to protect himself. However, when Arthur accidentally drops the gun while performing at a children's hospital and is subsequently dismissed from his job, Randall denies ever giving him the weapon. Narratively, this incident illustrates Arthur's tendency to place unquestioning trust in others despite repeated experiences of betrayal. Visually, the contrast between Arthur's anxious facial expressions and Randall's composed denial emphasizes the imbalance of power between the two characters. The relatively static camera, restrained editing, and prolonged reaction shots allow viewers to witness Arthur's emotional confusion rather than merely following the progression of the narrative. This scene therefore demonstrates fragility not because Arthur becomes a victim once again, but because his emotional dependence, limited social judgment, and inability to anticipate deception repeatedly expose him to exploitation. From Abrams' perspective, fragility functions here as an anti-heroic characteristic because it reveals a protagonist who lacks the emotional stability and heroic

confidence traditionally associated with classical heroes. Nevertheless, this vulnerability should not be interpreted as sufficient evidence of anti-heroism in itself. Arthur's anti-heroic status emerges only when this emotional fragility subsequently interacts with his exercise of agency, morally ambiguous decisions, and increasingly violent responses to the social environment, which are examined in the following sections.

4.1.2 Ineffectuality as Narrative Failure and the Emergence of Moral Agency

Another dominant characteristic identified in Arthur Fleck's characterization is ineffectuality. Abrams (1999) describes an ineffectual character as someone who repeatedly fails to accomplish desired goals despite continuous effort. In *Joker* (2019), Arthur's ineffectuality is represented not simply through unsuccessful actions but through his persistent inability to obtain recognition, dignity, and social acceptance using legitimate means. His dream of becoming a successful stand-up comedian reflects a genuine aspiration to connect with others through humor and performance. However, every attempt to achieve this goal is met with rejection, misunderstanding, or humiliation. Consequently, Arthur's ineffectuality functions as more than professional failure; it becomes a narrative mechanism illustrating the collapse of socially acceptable pathways before his eventual embrace of morally destructive alternatives.

This characteristic is clearly represented during Arthur's stand-up comedy performance at Pogo's Comedy Club (approximately 00:33:40–00:36:20). Throughout the performance, Arthur confidently delivers jokes that he has carefully prepared in his notebook, believing that they will entertain the audience. Nevertheless, his neurological condition causes uncontrollable laughter at inappropriate moments, disrupting the rhythm of his performance and preventing effective communication with the audience. Cinematically, the sequence emphasizes Arthur's failure through prolonged medium shots that keep him isolated on the stage while simultaneously exposing the audience's silence and discomfort. Rather than using rapid editing or exaggerated reactions, the film allows the uncomfortable pauses between Arthur's jokes to dominate the scene. The absence of applause, combined with subdued ambient sound and restrained audience responses, creates an atmosphere of emotional distance instead of comedic engagement. Arthur's hesitant gestures, awkward body posture, and forced smile further reinforce the contrast between his aspiration for recognition and his inability to achieve it. These audiovisual elements transform what might otherwise be interpreted as a failed comedy routine into a representation of profound social exclusion.

However, Arthur's unsuccessful performance should not be interpreted as evidence of anti-heroism by itself—many fictional protagonists experience failure without becoming anti-heroes. Within Abrams' framework, ineffectuality contributes to anti-heroic characterization because Arthur repeatedly persists despite continuous rejection, gradually losing confidence in the social values that previously guided his aspirations. Instead of abandoning his desire for recognition, Arthur increasingly questions the legitimacy of the social institutions that exclude him, including his workplace, public audiences, and media culture represented by Murray Franklin's television program. The failure of his stand-up performance therefore symbolizes more than personal incompetence; it marks the erosion of Arthur's belief that acceptance can be achieved through socially legitimate behavior. This transition is narratively significant because it precedes the emergence of his moral agency, in which violence gradually replaces performance as the means through which he demands public recognition. Consequently, Arthur's ineffectuality becomes an essential anti-heroic characteristic not because he fails to become a

comedian, but because repeated failure fundamentally reshapes his moral decisions and transforms the direction of his narrative identity.

4.1.3 *Loneliness as Social Alienation and Anti-Heroic Identity*

The third dominant characteristic identified in Arthur Fleck's anti-heroic characterization is loneliness. Abrams (1999) describes loneliness as a condition in which an individual experiences profound social and emotional isolation due to the absence of meaningful interpersonal relationships. In *Joker* (2019), Arthur's loneliness extends beyond physical solitude; it represents a persistent inability to establish genuine emotional connections with other people despite his desire for acceptance and companionship. Throughout the narrative, Arthur remains socially disconnected from his colleagues, neighbors, family environment, and the wider community. Consequently, loneliness functions not merely as an emotional condition but as a narrative device that intensifies Arthur's psychological vulnerability and gradually reshapes his perception of reality. This prolonged social isolation becomes one of the principal foundations upon which his anti-heroic identity is constructed.

Arthur's loneliness is most clearly illustrated through his imagined relationship with his neighbor, Sophie Dumond (approximately 00:27:30–01:10:00). The film initially presents their interactions as if they were developing a genuine romantic relationship. Sophie appears to accompany Arthur during emotionally significant moments, including attending his stand-up performance and comforting him after his mother's hospitalization. However, the later revelation that these encounters exist only within Arthur's imagination fundamentally alters the audience's interpretation of the preceding narrative. This revelation is communicated primarily through visual storytelling rather than explicit dialogue. The restrained camera movement, intimate framing, soft lighting, and relatively warm color tones used in Arthur's imagined encounters with Sophie create an atmosphere of emotional intimacy. In contrast, when Arthur unexpectedly enters Sophie's apartment, the film abruptly replaces this intimacy with static framing, greater physical distance between the characters, and Sophie's visible fear and confusion. Without relying on explanatory narration, the film invites viewers to recognize that Arthur's emotional companionship has existed solely within his delusional imagination. The effectiveness of this sequence lies in its careful manipulation of audience perception, allowing viewers to experience Arthur's loneliness before revealing the depth of his social isolation.

Nevertheless, Arthur's loneliness should not be interpreted solely as evidence of mental illness or emotional deprivation. Many fictional characters experience isolation without developing anti-heroic identities. Within Abrams' framework, loneliness becomes anti-heroic because it contributes to Arthur's growing detachment from conventional social values while simultaneously reinforcing the audience's alignment with his perspective. As Arthur increasingly loses meaningful human relationships, he also loses the social and moral restraints that previously connected him to ordinary civic life. This progression is reflected in his gradual withdrawal from empathy, increasing emotional indifference toward violence, and eventual acceptance of the Joker identity as an alternative source of recognition and belonging. Importantly, the film does not suggest that loneliness justifies Arthur's subsequent crimes. Rather, loneliness functions as one element within a broader process through which vulnerability, repeated failure, and moral agency converge to transform Arthur into a morally ambiguous anti-hero. Therefore, Arthur's isolation should be understood not as the defining feature of his character but as one of the interconnected conditions that shape his anti-heroic development throughout the narrative.

4.2 Discussion

The findings demonstrate that Arthur Fleck's anti-heroic characterization cannot be explained solely through psychological vulnerability or social marginalization. Instead, the interaction among fragility, ineffectuality, and loneliness gradually reshapes Arthur's moral agency, allowing him to evolve into a morally ambiguous protagonist who departs from conventional heroic values. These findings support Abrams' (1999) proposition that anti-heroes differ from traditional heroes because they lack qualities such as courage, dignity, moral certainty, and social competence. However, the present findings also extend Abrams' framework by demonstrating that these characteristics should not be interpreted independently. Rather, Arthur's anti-heroic identity emerges from the cumulative interaction between repeated emotional suffering, persistent social failure, and his subsequent moral choices. Consequently, the study indicates that fragility, ineffectuality, and loneliness are not sufficient indicators of anti-heroism unless they influence the character's exercise of agency and ethical decision-making throughout the narrative.

The findings also correspond with previous studies while providing a broader interpretative perspective. Asha and Syawal (2021) concluded that Arthur Fleck is primarily characterized by fragility, ineffectuality, and loneliness, and the present study confirms these three dominant characteristics. Nevertheless, unlike the previous study, which mainly classified Arthur's anti-heroic traits based on intrinsic narrative elements, the present research demonstrates how these characteristics are simultaneously constructed through audiovisual representation, including framing, mise-en-scène, lighting, performance, sound design, editing, and visual symbolism. Likewise, Skryabin (2021), Saud and Mahajani (2022), and Dewi *et al.*, (2025) emphasize Arthur's psychological trauma and social deprivation as major determinants of his transformation. The present findings support these interpretations but further argue that psychological vulnerability alone does not adequately explain Arthur's anti-heroic status. Instead, Arthur becomes an anti-hero because psychological suffering gradually interacts with deliberate moral choices that increasingly reject conventional ethical values. Therefore, mental illness, loneliness, or social exclusion should be understood as contributing conditions rather than defining characteristics of anti-heroism.

The study likewise provides a clearer distinction between the concepts of protagonist, villain, psychologically vulnerable character, and anti-hero, which has remained insufficiently addressed in previous scholarship. Arthur functions as the protagonist because the narrative is consistently organized around his perspective, experiences, and transformation. Simultaneously, several of his actions—including multiple murders and his public execution of Murray Franklin—display characteristics commonly associated with villainous behavior. Nevertheless, the film continuously encourages audience alignment with Arthur by revealing his psychological suffering, institutional neglect, and social alienation before presenting his increasingly violent actions. This narrative alignment distinguishes Arthur from a conventional villain whose primary narrative function is to oppose the protagonist. Likewise, Arthur should not be understood merely as a psychologically vulnerable or tragic character because his transformation ultimately involves conscious moral agency rather than passive victimhood. Consequently, Arthur occupies a unique narrative position in which vulnerability and violence coexist, producing the moral ambiguity that defines contemporary anti-heroic characterization.

Another important finding concerns the relationship between Arthur's violence and his anti-heroic identity. The results indicate that Arthur's acts of violence should not be interpreted as evidence that he is simply a criminal or villain. Rather, violence represents the culmination of a prolonged narrative

process through which repeated humiliation, emotional isolation, institutional abandonment, and social rejection progressively erode his belief in conventional social values. This interpretation supports contemporary perspectives on anti-heroism, which argue that anti-heroes frequently emerge from conflicts between individual suffering and dysfunctional social structures rather than from inherently evil intentions (Hagelin & Silverman, 2022; Öztürk, 2024). Nevertheless, the present study does not suggest that Arthur's experiences justify or legitimize his crimes. Instead, the film constructs moral ambiguity by simultaneously encouraging empathy toward Arthur's suffering while exposing the destructive consequences of his decisions. This dual representation helps explain why Arthur should be interpreted as an anti-hero rather than a heroic symbol of social justice.

Finally, the findings contribute to contemporary film and literary studies by demonstrating that anti-heroic characterization in *Joker* (2019) results from the interaction between narrative construction and cinematic representation rather than from character traits alone. Previous studies have predominantly emphasized Arthur's psychological condition, trauma, or social exclusion. The present study extends this body of knowledge by showing that cinematographic elements—including framing, camera distance, lighting, mise-en-scène, editing, sound, and performance—play a central role in directing audience sympathy toward Arthur while simultaneously confronting viewers with the ethical consequences of his violent transformation. This integrated textual and visual analysis therefore provides a more comprehensive explanation of how anti-heroism is constructed in contemporary cinema and contributes to a clearer conceptual distinction between anti-hero, protagonist, villain, and psychologically vulnerable character.

5. Concluding Remarks and Recommendation

This study examined how Arthur Fleck is portrayed as an anti-hero in Todd Phillips's *Joker* (2019) by employing a qualitative textual and visual analysis based on Abrams' (1999) anti-hero framework. The research addressed how Arthur's characterization reflects anti-heroic identity through narrative and audiovisual representation. The analysis identified three dominant anti-hero characteristics—fragility, ineffectuality, and loneliness—which consistently emerged throughout the film. These characteristics were interpreted through dialogue, characterization, cinematography, mise-en-scène, lighting, framing, performance, sound, editing, and visual symbolism. The findings indicate that Arthur should not be understood merely as a psychologically vulnerable individual, a conventional villain, or a tragic figure. Rather, he is constructed as a morally ambiguous protagonist whose anti-heroic identity develops through the interaction between emotional vulnerability, repeated social failure, social isolation, and increasingly deliberate moral choices. Accordingly, the study demonstrates that anti-heroism in *Joker* (2019) is represented not by isolated personality traits but by the relationship between characterization, narrative agency, and cinematic representation.

The study contributes theoretically by providing a clearer conceptual distinction between the anti-hero, protagonist, villain, and psychologically vulnerable character, thereby addressing an ambiguity that frequently appears in previous studies of *Joker* (2019). Rather than equating anti-heroism with psychological suffering or criminal behavior, the findings show that anti-heroic characterization emerges through the interaction of moral ambiguity, narrative centrality, and audience alignment. Methodologically, this study extends previous research by integrating textual interpretation with systematic visual analysis, demonstrating how cinematic elements actively participate in constructing

Arthur Fleck's anti-heroic identity. Practically, the findings offer a more comprehensive analytical framework for scholars and students of literature and film studies who seek to examine morally ambiguous protagonists through both narrative and audiovisual perspectives.

This study has several limitations. First, the analysis is limited to a single film and therefore cannot be generalized to all cinematic representations of anti-heroes. Second, the interpretation is confined to Abrams' (1999) anti-hero framework and does not incorporate alternative theoretical perspectives such as narratology, audience reception, ethical criticism, or psychological film analysis. Third, although the study employs close textual and visual analysis, it does not investigate audience interpretation or compare Arthur Fleck with anti-hero characters from other films or television series. Future research is therefore encouraged to conduct comparative studies involving multiple anti-hero narratives, integrate interdisciplinary theoretical approaches, and examine how audiences interpret morally ambiguous protagonists across different cultural and social contexts. Such investigations would further enrich the understanding of anti-heroic characterization in contemporary audiovisual media.

Statement of Use of Generative AI

During the preparation of this work, the author used generative artificial intelligence tools to support the scientific writing process. Grammarly was used to check grammar, refine writing style, and improve clarity in scientific writing. All interpretations, analyses, and conclusions presented in this study are the sole responsibility of the author.

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