

It's All About the Punch(line): The Crossing of Masculinity's Border as portrayed in Todd Phillips's *Joker*

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Catcalls, rapists, dick jokes, and risky business are only a handful of symptoms of the current worldwide viral epidemic dubbed “toxic masculinity.” Focusing on toxic masculinity in Todd Phillips’s film, *Joker*, this essay recounts the toxic behaviors associated with America’s hegemonic masculine system and addresses how party clown and failed comic Arthur Fleck’s journey across masculinity’s border—and transformation into the famous villain, Joker—glorifies the adoption of these toxic traits. Phillips’s film is an unhealthy influence on young, nontraditionally masculine males. Fleck’s character arc teaches them that using violence, sexually asserting oneself, and withholding emotions all come with serious social benefits and lack any consequences. Phillips claims through *Joker* that the oppressed unmasculine man can overcome his social hardships by simply replacing his weak, effeminate personality traits (such as crying openly, solving conflicts without physicality,

and sexual passivity) with mainstream toxic behaviors. This personality change is necessary to cross the border into mainstream masculinity and elevated social states, according to Phillips’s character study. Phillips’s catch-all solution is a claim I contradict with evidence of the failing health of young men in real-world America, concluding with a plea for the creation of safe spaces for healthy male identity exploration. overcome his social hardships by simply replacing his weak, effeminate personality traits (such as crying openly, solving conflicts without physicality, and sexual passivity) with mainstream toxic behaviors. This personality change is necessary to cross the border into mainstream masculinity and elevated social states, according to Phillips’s character study. Phillips’s catch-all solution is a claim I contradict with evidence of the failing health of young men in real-world America, concluding with a plea for the creation of safe spaces for healthy male identity exploration.

Toxic masculinity is a modern pandemic that has overtaken young white men in America at an incredible rate, with restrictive symptoms such as withholding one's emotions, displaying hypersexuality and aggression, and adopting unnaturally high self-reliance, among others. These values are not intrinsic, but societally enforced in the practice dubbed hegemonic masculinity. Todd Phillips's version of DC villain Joker, Arthur Fleck, is a modern poster child for the American male everyman's journey to adopt toxic masculine principles in order to mature into a man of dangerous confidence and consequence. Fleck's zero-to-hero character arc is an adept illustration of how society forces men to cross a metaphysical border from "weakling boy" to "real man" in order to gain respect from others and exert control over one's own body. However, as Fleck's journey across the border illuminates, crossing into toxic masculinity requires the adoption of many dangerous traits—from coveting violence to embracing hypersexuality and adopting emotional façades—and serves as a testament to why toxic masculinity's border should remain uncrossed.

A Biblical Book: Masculinity's Commandments

In tracing Fleck's haphazard arc toward toxicity, one must first understand exactly what toxic masculinity requires of its adherents. In 1976, social scientists Deborah David and Robert Brannon synthesized a "Guy Code" from years of research, having drafted a bible-to-be for those coming into manliness:

1. No Sissy Stuff: anything that even remotely hints of femininity is prohibited. A real man must avoid any behavior or characteristic associated with women.
2. Be a Big Wheel: masculinity is measured by success, power, and the admiration of others. One must possess wealth, fame, and status to be considered manly.
3. Be a Sturdy Oak: manliness requires rationality, toughness, and self-reliance. A man must remain calm in any situation, show no emotion, and admit no weakness.
4. Give 'em Hell: men must exude an aura of daring and aggression, and must be willing to take risks, to 'go for it' even when reason and fear suggest otherwise (Levine 145).

But America hasn't burned this bible yet. Distinguished sociologist Dr. Michael Kimmel recently asked young men (ages 17-22) from every state in America (and 15 other countries) what phrases came to mind when they heard someone say, "be a man." Much to his dismay, Kimmel found that the Guy Code's pillars remained largely unchanged:

1. Boys Don't Cry
2. It's Better to be Mad than Sad
3. Don't Get Mad—Get Even
4. Take It Like a Man

5. He Who has the Most Toys When He Dies, Wins
6. Just Do It or Ride or Die
7. Size Matters
8. I Don't Stop to Ask for Directions
9. Nice Guys Finish Last
10. It's All Good (Kimmel 45).

These “commandments” form the foundation of toxic masculinity—real men must follow them to receive the highest social status. Several of these commandments are embraced by Fleck as he fills out his (rather large, clown-like) shoes during the film’s progression.

“It’s Better to Be Mad than Sad”: Beat-Downs and Bystanders

The classic Joker is one of the American public’s most beloved villains. He is a complete madman boasting a chemically-inflicted skin disfiguration and a love for violence and manic laughter. However, Todd Phillips’s Joker, Arthur Fleck, is contrastingly unremarkable. He is a socially awkward, sad party clown who simply learns to stand up for himself. Fleck’s life is one boisterous, walking example of Kimmel’s second principle, “It’s better to be mad than sad” (Kimmel 45). When Fleck simply chooses to be “sad,” he is beaten and battered. The film proposes that violence is the necessary answer to Fleck’s woes, using it as the vehicle to help him cross the border into manhood. Joker opens with Fleck, the professional party clown, sporting a painted grin while spinning signs for a liquidated business. Only seconds later, a gaggle of teenagers seize Fleck’s sign and a chase ensues, ending in an alley beatdown. While kicking Fleck, the boys shout, “This guy’s weak, he can’t do nothing. Harder, harder!” and “Beat him up, take his stuff” (Phillips). [The camera engages in a lengthy pause](#) to emphasize Fleck’s pitiful state as he cradles his groin on the pavement, painted smile twisted with grief.



The camera engages in a 24-second pause to emphasize Fleck’s pitiful state.

Within the film's first minutes, Fleck is presented as a pitiable effeminate character; this is what motivates the young boys to target him. When Fleck is a "sad" man, he's an easy target for physical beatings. This trait is a reflection of toxic masculinity's emphasis on learning how to "take it like a man," that is, with unbreakable stoicism. The boys also take his belongings in a brief ode to Kimmel's fifth principle, "He Who has the Most Toys ...Wins" (Kimmel 45). Fleck isn't respected by others because his failed masculinity places him within the bordered outlands of the social eye.

However, everything changes once Fleck is gifted a pistol by his coworker Randall. Suddenly, Fleck can choose to be "mad," and his life becomes considerably better. Arthur Fleck first toes the border between weak and powerful masculinity on a late-night subway ride when an unexpected episode of his pseudobulbar affect (uncontrollable, mood-noncongruent laughter) pins him beneath the shoes of a drunken businessman trio who mock and assault his shaking, contorted body (Phillips). An analysis of this scene's physical posturing is pertinent to illustrate Fleck's newfound empowerment after crossing toxic masculinity's border through a sudden act of violence.

During the early stages of confrontation, Fleck remains seated and small while the businessmen circle over him with outstretched arms and loose posture that project their socially owed confidence. The men's relative posturing is indicative of their relative social statuses. These businessmen bring home respectable money, sexually assert themselves upon a female passenger on the subway, and use violence to uphold their place in the pecking order over poor, unmasculine, feeble virgin Fleck. But once he draws his pistol, Fleck unfolds his spine for the first time and [stands tall while marching after the last of his aggressors](#) who is symbolically wounded into a limp (Phillips).



Fleck stands tall, pistol in hand, positioned dominantly over his last victim.

Fleck is able to stand over the now-terrified man's body before murdering him from above, indicating that with violence he is able to quite literally stand above the men to whom society has awarded a higher social status for living within masculinity's borders. Fleck then does something unexpected. Instead of grieving, he performs a ninety second dance in a nearby bathroom to further emphasize the unexpected wave of joy he has experienced from getting mad rather than sad. Miraculously, Fleck manages to escape the crime scene and return to his home, visually minimizing the consequences which come from using violence to solve disputes.

The contrast here is blatant. When Fleck passively took a beating in the film's opening scene, his body and paycheck were bruised and broken just like his wooden sign, but when he became angry and killed his aggressors, his problems simply vanished. His adoption of violence as a problem-solving method is the most apparent sign that feeble Fleck has hopped over toxic masculinity's border, taking Kimmel's adage to heart; it really is better to be mad than sad (45). Once Fleck retaliates by using violence to control others, he finally sheds his weak façade to reveal his inner Joker: a confident man with a more jovial attitude who is an active player in his own life's story. Affirming the positivity of this masculine behavioral change is the next visit Fleck pays his social worker, wherein he expresses that he's "finally a real person" and that "[his] life matters" (Phillips). These expressions heavily coincide with toxic masculinity's notion that the only men of consequence are those who use violence to obtain power, something the malnourished, weedy clown had not attempted before acquiring a firearm.

Much later in the film, popular ex-coworker Randall arrives at Fleck's apartment with their mutual friend Gary in tow. Randall begs Fleck to falsely testify that Randall didn't give Fleck the pistol he used for the subway car's triple-murder (thus acquitting Randall from any criminal charges), but Fleck simply smiles while stabbing Randall repeatedly with a pair of blunt scissors (Phillips). This gruesome event indicates Fleck's growing confidence in his manhood, as he no longer feels subordinate to his larger, more popular backstabbing colleague. Whereas Fleck once lapped up insincere praise from Randall in the green room, his growing sense of entitlement to power now emboldens him to eliminate the man threatening to blow his cover. By "getting mad" and utilizing violence, Fleck effectively eliminates this threat to his new lifestyle so he can climb the social pecking order. Further, he does so yet again with no consequences, as Gary wearily leaves the apartment alone, having decided to withhold this information from the police for the film's duration.

Fleck's violent tendencies escalate when he feels betrayed by his own mother, Penny, who had been withholding information on his adoption from him. Fleck verbally indicates his crossing of toxic masculinity's borders while standing beside her hospital bed,

explaining that “I used to think my life was a tragedy, but now I realize it’s a ...comedy” (Phillips). This statement is the final indicator that Fleck no longer will simply lay down and feel “sad.” He has turned to unpredictability and reckless abandon, finally adopting toxic masculinity’s desire for chaos and power over others by “[giving] ‘em hell” (Kimmel 45). After this admittance, Fleck coolly smothers his mother, illustrating his newfound masculine entitlement to power, and escapes into the night. Important to notice is the [relative positioning of bodies](#) here as well—Fleck’s power has overcome that of even his own mother, indicated by his high relative position while standing over her low-lying bed (Phillips).



The camera focuses on Fleck with an angle equal to his eye level to imply rationality regarding his mother’s strangulation.

The camera’s angle also remains parallel with Fleck’s eye-level to suggest his actions are levelheaded and thus minimizes the horror of his violent act by excluding his mother from her own death scene. Despite the disturbing nature of this event, the film’s use of framing and positioning suggests that Fleck is not behaving as an insane villain, but simply as a different man—a real man, thanks to toxic masculinity’s commandments. Fleck’s use of violence to cut social ties to the weak and unlikeable (his mother) proves that he’s willing to do everything necessary to cross into toxic manhood, and that he has no desire to hold onto the past or return to the effeminate boyhood from which he came.

Important to note in Fleck’s beatdowns is the underlying perpetuator of male violence as a means to enforce masculinity’s border during assaults: bystander silence. There are easily [dozens, even hundreds of bystanders](#) who watch Fleck chase down the mischievous sign-snatching teens in the film’s opening scene, yet all refuse to respond to his frantic cries for help (Phillips).



Fleck sprints past countless bystanders while crying for help—most don't even spare him a glance.

Similarly, both Randall and Penny's murders were sloppy, with bystanders and vital-monitoring technology witnessing the events. Yet Fleck is never explicitly punished for either crime, projecting that violence is an acceptable solution to one's problems since there are no consequences, all thanks to bystander silence. Scenes such as these are prime examples of how Phillips's film asserts the problematic mentality that guys can act however they please without the risk of being held accountable for their actions—showing young men that they can mirror Fleck's actions to rise from zero to “hero” without any unwanted consequences.

Unfortunately, the Guy Code can easily explain the reluctance of bystanders to stop an assault. Real men don't show weaknesses such as walking away from a situation, stepping forward to stop it, or informing an authority figure of any misdoings. Real men have each other's backs. Guys learn not to tell their teachers, their police force, their parents, to look the other way when lewd remarks are thrown at women. They learn to stay silent. They learn to let immoral behaviors continue unpunished. Weak men remain victims, and the Guy Code lives on.

Phillips's normalization of unopposed violence as a means to solve issues in film feeds into the greater hero film culture which young boys mirror as they mature. This leads to regular, real-life beatdowns in order to assert the hegemonic hierarchy. Thanks to fictional media, persons in power asserting their status over subordinates has become a “natural” process of life. Fleck—and American kids—are simply carrying out society's brutal orders.

While most fictional heroes and villains aren't children, they are no less guilty of asserting a strict hierarchy upon their fictional worlds. Heroes sit atop the social hierarchy by means of using artificial assistance (flight, laser beams, and the likes) to control others. They are, simply put, humanity's best. The everyman stands below them, and villains are the scum of society. Modern elite heroes, according to professor of mental health Dr. Sharon Lamb, are far healthier influences than their comic book counterparts, who were “real people

with real problems and many vulnerabilities.” She classifies two types of modern hero’s masculinity: “slackers,” who are funny but avoid responsibility and exist as sidekicks, and the more socially desirable “players,” who are dominant, stoic, and violent (Lamb). Young boys seeking validation are far more likely to model themselves after the players such as Tony Stark/Iron Man whose persona outside of the super-suit manipulates women, rakes in cash, and demeans others in order to gain confidence, increase his social status, and give ‘em hell.

A character’s physical superpowers often also serve as a metaphor for the power used to put down others deemed as “lesser” by society’s elite. While real people can never hope to supernaturally slow time or breathe fire, they can vicariously live through empowered characters who possess the extraordinary means to subvert others. Most of these heroes are male, and male heroes are almost exclusively muscular, confident, and charismatic. By these standards, skinny, awkward Arthur Fleck should never have been able to transform into a powerful, inspiring figure, and yet he’s managed to win the public over. Although Fleck is completely unremarkable, his willingness to use any means to gain social acclaim is what makes him even more admirable to audiences who are “just like him.” Specifically, these audiences are composed of primarily young men who are still adrift in the turbid sea of masculinity, learning what they’re capable of enacting in order to rise to the top. Joker itself is the story of Fleck’s transformation from an isolationist nobody to a violent, confident player who murders all whom he had once held dear and proudly confesses to his crimes on live television without batting an eyelash. Therefore, Joker serves as a perilous playbook for real boys hoping to transform into players and follow Fleck across toxic masculinity’s border.

“Size Matters”: Homosociality and Hypersexuality

Behind each example of male-male bullying lies an explicit trend—sexual themes. Sex is a point of fixation forced upon men by the media, expressed in Kimmel’s rule number seven: “Size Matters” (45). To develop his sub-par comedic material, Fleck spends his nights watching comedians, from the famous television comic Murray Franklin to other wannabes. Much of the material Fleck watches relies heavily on the use of lewd jokes, such as one male comic who tells a long-winded metaphor about how men view sex like driving and women as a row of spot[s] to park in. “Oh, I have to pay to park here? Never mind,” he jokes, implying that, like a stretch of marked pavement, women have no willpower to decline sex and should be “easy” to sexually access. After he finishes the set, the audience goes wild, whistling and hollering (Phillips).

Yet another comic tells a sexual roleplay story with his wife playing a college student who is “willing to do anything to pass [his ‘class’].” The audience laughs at the comic’s sexual comments, relating his story to their own personal experiences and expectations

in the bedroom. These situations are unfamiliar to Fleck, a virgin and social isolationist. He laughs at all the wrong times during the set, proving that laughing at sex and the objectification of others are not innate tendencies; they're adopted traits enforced by society when crossing toxic masculinity's border. Fleck also earns a few side-eyes for his mis-timed laughter, indicating that there is little tolerance for people who don't live within masculinity's postulates. To show what he's learned that night, Fleck jots a note in large, messy script: "sexy jokes alwaze funny" (Phillips).

Where in society, though, is this pressure to start sexualizing the world coming from? Citizens are bombarded from all angles by the media's sexist and objectifying television shows, movies, product promotions, music, video games, and more. Content from all sides promises happiness once men transition into sexual confidence and dominance. Society depicts men as hypersexual beings who must be physically attractive, and sexually active—standards which assert the Guy Code's emphasis on risk-taking, use of genitalia, and an inflated sense of self-importance. Although Gotham is in an alternate reality, it's safe to say that sex still sells everywhere; its comics, construction workers, and passersby toss around sexualized comments from the film's background. Comedy broadcasts featuring lewd jokes often play on television sets, and audiences applaud while watching men kiss strangers without consent.

As Arthur Fleck's confidence in his newfound social behaviors grows, he himself takes a large leap in the "right direction" regarding virility, having stalked his neighbor for days before arriving at her doorstep to kiss her suddenly without consent. A similar incident happens near the film's conclusion when Fleck (now called Joker) seizes the chin of elderly Murray Franklin Show guest Dr. Sally and [kisses her on live television](#) while she flails her arms, eyes open in surprise, for nearly twenty seconds (Phillips).



Fleck, now called "Joker," forcefully kisses the elderly Doctor Sally on live television, who becomes visibly uncomfortable.

It seems that after crossing masculinity's border, Fleck has taken the other comics' lifestyle advice to heart by asserting dominance over the few females he encounters, in heavy contrast to the awkward virgin he once was. This problematic behavior extends from society's assertion of male virility: a man must be sexually forward, and that he can "have" any woman he wishes. By the film's conclusion, Fleck has successfully pocketed another trait of toxic masculinity—the necessity of dominant virulence—in order to step into toxic masculine territory.

In fact, many real and fictional men carry false or shaky definitions of consent and assault. Eighty-eight percent of men whose actions fit under the legal definition of rape adamantly denied that they had committed that act. This is because men are misled about what exactly constitutes rape. Society teaches them through sexist, brutal pornography and misogynistic music that all women are sexually available and have a sex drive just as high—or even higher—than men's, which is not exclusively true (Katz 27). Men are taught by American culture that women are continuously open to sexual advances regardless of whether they voice a consensual "yes" and are always ready to "take it rough" (reminiscent of the film's joke comparing women to parking spots), which often results in rape or attempted rape.

In America, "less than one percent of rape is committed by women," but rape is classified as a women's issue even though men are the perpetrators. This is because society has normalized hypersexuality as a normal male behavior. As American educator, filmmaker, actor, and advocate Jason Katz explains, "Men are the ones doing most of the battering and almost all of the raping. Men are the ones paying the prostitutes (and killing them in video games), going to strip clubs, renting sexually degrading pornography, [and] writing and performing misogynistic music" (5). American men are praised for a high libido, indicating that "real" men must be sexually dominant in order to cross the border into manhood and earn social praise. These claims carry across to Phillips's *Joker*. No male character is ever sexually degraded or beaten by a woman, and neither woman retaliates after being sexually assaulted by Fleck, normalizing his dominant behavior. Phillips's film is a problematic space for men to wreak havoc on society without consequences.

"It's All Good": Standing Tall like a Sturdy Oak

Perhaps the most famous trait of toxic masculinity is adopting the sturdiness of an oak. A man must remain unemotional and stand tall no matter his circumstances, or as Kimmel recounts, "It's All Good" (45). What sets this rule apart, however, is that Fleck learns this trait during his childhood and therefore exhibits it throughout his time on the screen. It's revealed late in the film that he was abused by his stepfather and neglected by

his own mother, who caused the head trauma behind his medical condition. Because Fleck's own guardians abused him during his childhood, he never learned to trust others enough to lean on them emotionally. Thus, the seeds of Fleck's sturdy oak are well-grown by the time he graces the silver screen.

When asked to share his mental health journal with his social worker (post-triple murder), Fleck's shaking legs and fidgeting fingers express discomfort with the idea of sharing its contents, as he is accustomed to keeping his emotions to himself (Phillips). When she asks Fleck if "it help[s] to have someone to talk to?" he responds with, "I think I felt better when I was locked up in the hospital." The scene cuts abruptly to a clip of straight-jacketed Fleck [beating his head against the walls](#) of an isolation ward (Phillips). This brief statement implies that even at the height of Fleck's sickness he was never cared for by others, but instead locked in seclusion.



*Fleck beats his head forcefully against the glass window of his isolation ward cell's door in *Arkham Asylum*.*

In real-world America, males experience a lack of medical care as well. The average man perishes five years before the average woman as reported by the CDC, but physiological differences don't explain this discrepancy. According to a study of 250 participants conducted by psychology professors Himmelstein and Sanchez, men who held 'traditional beliefs' about masculinity were more likely to put off the confrontation of medical issues, compared with women or men who held less traditional beliefs (Himmelstein and Sanchez). Traditional beliefs included being "tough, brave, self-reliant, and restrained in expression of emotion." Fleck is one of these men, exhibiting reluctance to share his journal's many dark thoughts about death and depression with his social worker, which prevents her from properly helping him to improve his health. This scene contains just one example of the

postulates Fleck has been forced to adopt in order to cross toxic masculinity's border: "It's all good" (Kimmel 45).

In the film's early scenes, even after running out of medicine and losing a paycheck for his busted sign, Fleck still soothes his mother's worries. He reasons that "everybody's telling me that my stand-up is ready for the big clubs" (when he hadn't yet performed a single joke), following up with "I don't want you worrying about money, Mom, or me" (Phillips). Fleck's tendency to lie about his financial situation, mental health, and career progress are indicative of his desire to keep up appearances and admit no weakness, even to those whom he should trust. He cries in secret, hides his bruises, and quite literally paints on a happy face for work every day to keep the world unaware of his internal despondency. However, Fleck's façade does slip at times. He is seen shooting himself in the head with finger guns throughout the film, and even places his loaded pistol's barrel into his mouth in a moment of despair. While folded delicately in his kitchen chair, Fleck records a rightly telling note in his journal: "The worst part about having a mental illness is people expect you to behave as if you DON'T" (Phillips).

And Fleck is far from alone. Boys who develop depression are far less likely to seek treatment than their female counterparts. Why? Because real men don't cry. A plethora of psychologists argue that from an early age, boys are taught to stow away their emotions and never display weakness. As a result, boys feel effeminate not only if they express emotions, but even if they only feel any at all (Kimmel 53). For men, there is socially sourced shame in sadness and in showing emotional vulnerability. These feelings are left to fester until a man cannot bear his burden any longer. In the United States, eighty percent of suicide deaths are males according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Holmes).

Who's Enforcing the Border: The Gender Police

It's important to note that without social pressure, masculinity would be noticeably more diverse. Who, then, is moderating young guys' behaviors? It turns out, nearly all males have become the self-employed gender police. Teachers, coaches, strangers, and—most importantly—a guy's own bros observe and judge his behavior. If a guy didn't have physical strength or stoicism, he wasn't deemed a man, and his peers made sure he knew it by either taunts, physical assaults, or barefaced exclusion from activities.

Although Fleck's educational background is unclear, he does fall victim to the gender police as an adult several times throughout the film. In the film's early stages, Fleck is personally brought up onto the stage during a taping of *The Murray Franklin Show* after yelling "[I love you, Murray!](#)" and explaining that his own purpose in life is also to make others laugh (Phillips). Franklin then tells Fleck that he'd be a great son to have and hugs him affectionately. But when Fleck finally attempts to perform his own comedy set in a nightclub, video clips of it wind up on the same comedian's television show. [Franklin introduces Fleck](#) this time as "a guy who thinks if you just keep laughing, it'll somehow make you funny" and not only plays into the masculine urge to ignore the possibility of illness (considering Fleck looks pained in the tapes) but also makes a mockery of Fleck's aspirations, teasing that this is "in a world where everyone thinks they could do my job" (Phillips).

Franklin thoroughly mocks Fleck, comparing the clown to himself in order to demean Fleck and boost his own public opinion. This change in behavior is brought about when Fleck attempts to ascend the social ladder from audience member to competitor, illustrating the masculine urge to uphold the male hierarchy. Franklin's opinion of Fleck turns from sweet to sour, his scorn pushing Fleck back into his place—outside of masculinity's walls.

Additionally, billionaire Thomas Wayne (who Fleck mistakes as his biological father from his mother's lobotomy-driven illusions) treats Fleck in a similar manner. When Fleck dons an employee outfit and sneaks into a high-class film premiere, the affluent audience spares him no glances, even staring straight through him when he walks down into the aisle. This is because Fleck is perceived as a lowly server who is of no threat to them, and especially not to Thomas Wayne. When Fleck follows Wayne into the bathroom, the mogul looks straight past him at first (Phillips). As Fleck approaches, Wayne entertains his story with an amused expression and light laughter until it calls the billionaire's social reputation into question. Once Fleck doubles down on his claim that Thomas Wayne is his father, however, Wayne's demeanor changes. He begins interrupting Fleck as if to prevent socially injurious words from even escaping into the air and offers Fleck a bribe to keep him away from the glittering Wayne family reputation. When that approach doesn't work, however, Thomas Wayne takes the familiar masculine approach and socks Fleck in the nose before quickly leaving the room. Yet again, Fleck is beaten down by a male moderator with higher social status who wants nothing to do with a poor, unsuccessful social recluse.

It's Not All Good: Some Borders Shouldn't be Crossed

If "weak" men like Arthur Fleck weren't forced to march across the border into toxic masculinity to earn a place in society, the world would be a safer place. There would be fewer rape cases based on the blurry line of consent and dominant masculine positioning. There would be fewer male suicides in the United States from years of severe emotional isolation. Boys in schoolyards and sidewalks wouldn't have to limp home after being assaulted by teammates in the name of "manning up." Some borders are not meant to be crossed, and Arthur Fleck is a superlative example of the burdensome behavioral toll paid by unmasculine men when crossing into toxic masculinity.

Although Fleck glows with confidence and self-satisfaction when leading Gotham's underdogs as Joker, viewers behind the screen can recognize that he has become a violent, lewd, dangerous isolationist. He is a perfect villain. However, simply recognizing toxic masculinity in films like Joker isn't enough; we must learn to recognize these films' negative impact on America's real-life young men. Hero films are a staple of American culture, and young boys developing their identities look to these heroes (and sometimes, villains) to determine how to act and what to value. Therefore, Phillips's Joker is only one instance within a genre that's hindering toxic masculinity's real-world abolishment. We must strive to provide better examples of masculinity to America's boys; to provide a safe space for every man in society: one without the pressure to cross borders into toxic masculinity's dangerous territory.

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