

MOVIES

Clayface pushes the DCU into DISTURBING BODY HORROR TERRITORY

SABIL SADAT ZAHIR

**This review contains spoilers.*

Clayface is the third feature film in James Gunn and Peter Safran's DC Universe (DCU), following *Superman* (2025) and *Supergirl* (2026), based on the Batman villain of the same name. The movie provides a unique take on the genre, focusing on body horror and portraying a complex take on a person's loss of identity and the desperation that ensues after.

The film is a horror-revenge thriller centred on Matt Hagen, a successful actor who is horribly disfigured by a Gotham City crime boss and receives experimental treatment to repair the damage, resulting in unexpected changes to his body. The root of the story is based on Matt's loss of self and desire for revenge.

Clayface is more of an experimental mixed-genre film than a straightforward horror or superhero film, blending elements of a crime-thriller, revenge quest, and body horror. There are very few jump scares in the movie, with the horror stemming purely from the gore and disturbing scenes of Matt Hagen's body transformation. The superhero (or, in this case, supervillain) aspects of the movie come from Matt's revenge quest. While this side of the plot is satisfying, it does slightly undercut the scares and existential dread built through the gruesome body horror side of the story.

Matt Hagen's descent into madness is done with masterful complexity, as from the beginning of the film his true personality is left ambiguous. Matt is neither completely heroic nor villainous; his profession as an actor and "becoming other people" is hinted at as being his coping mechanism for having an abusive childhood. His gradual transformation and ability to not just portray but physically become other people are both tragic and poetic to his character. He is a character with no sense of self, and he values himself by how others perceive him and the validation he receives as an actor. Subsequently, he values others based on that same philosophy, as demonstrated by his relationship with Dr Caitlyn Corr.

Caitlyn is the only character who helps Matt, and thus he begins to develop an idealised version of her and fails to perceive her as anything more than that. While his pursuit of revenge may seem somewhat "heroic", his relationship with Caitlyn devolves into a one-sided obsession. When she ultimately rejects him, it drives him toward his inevitable villainous turn. After finally entering his comic-accurate monstrous form at the end of the film, he holds on to that idealised version of Caitlyn. This aspect of the story can be interpreted as a subtle commentary on consent and unhealthy relationships based on idealisation and desire, and not taking into account the other person's individuality.

A minor aspect that may disappoint certain fans is the absence of any reference to Batman, even though *Clayface* is primarily a Batman villain and the movie is set in Gotham City. On its own, the plot does work well as solely a *Clayface* origin story; however, the lack of Batman connections is a bit of a missed opportunity. Furthermore, the film's approach to blending genres does make it more of a "jack of all trades", as the elements of horror and revenge thriller make it so that the movie doesn't excel at either but still manages to be sufficiently good enough to be enjoyable.

Clayface is yet another unconventional addition to the DCU, delivering a brilliant mix of body horror and revenge thriller within the superhero genre. It does not vastly expand the lore of the cinematic universe; however, it does give a solid, standalone character study on identity and self. *Clayface* is an easy recommendation not just for fans of DC Comics, but also for horror enthusiasts and people looking to see a satisfying revenge story.

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