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**Science vs. Morals: A Study of J. Robert
Oppenheimer in Christopher Nolan's
Oppenheimer (2023)**

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the Requirements for an M.A. Degree in English Literature and Civilization

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Oppenheimer (2023) Movie Poster.

Abstract

The present dissertation is a character study of the historical figure J. Robert Oppenheimer as portrayed in Christopher Nolan's film *Oppenheimer* (2023). To examine the psychology behind his behavior, this study draws from Freudian psychoanalysis theory to be able to understand the inner workings of the scientist's mind, and the unconscious drives and internal conflicts behind his decisions. This research spans his college years, his central role in the famous Manhattan Project, the creation of the atomic bomb, and his eventual downfall during the 1954 security hearing. Oppenheimer is analyzed as a subject plagued by guilt, repression, and an unrelenting death drive. The aim of this study is to offer a clear theoretical framework and critically examine the psychological and moral dimensions of Oppenheimer. It explores how his life was built upon, and then ultimately shattered by scientific ambition, political power, and moral conflict. Moreover, the value of this research lays in its originality as the film remains relatively recent and underexplored. The major lack of scholarly research regarding this topic leaves plenty of space for new critical perspectives that would contribute to the understanding of its psychological and thematic depth.

Key words: J. Robert Oppenheimer, Manhattan Project, moral conflict, guilt, psychoanalysis, repression, science, moral.

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Dedication

We dedicate this work to our families and friends, whose unwavering support and encouragement have accompanied us throughout this academic journey.

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GENERAL CONCLUSION

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Cinema is often hailed as the seventh art, a kaleidoscope of image, sound, and light. It is used to convey ideas, shift and control narratives, and portray the struggling nature of the human experience. Since its invention in the late nineteenth century, it did not stop evolving into what is now considered as one of the greatest form of storytelling known to mankind. Cinema's strength lies in its undeniable diversity, proposing multiple genres. While science fiction and fantasy like *The Hunger Games* (2012) and *The Chronicles of Narnia* (2005) offer an escape from reality, biopics and war films such as *Dunkirk* (2017) and *A Complete Unknown* (2024), in contrast, confront it, reflecting on society and history.

As the medium matured throughout the twentieth century, cinema became increasingly intertwined with the world's shifting political and social landscape. It is not solely used for entertainment purposes, it is also to inform, challenge, and at times manipulate. The film industry is a reflection of global crises, ideological movements, and cultural revolutions, becoming both a product of its time and a tool to shape public consciousness. In this way, history and cinema form a dynamic dialogue, working hand in hand to create a shared narrative where facts and imagination intertwine.

Many historical events affected the movie industry and inspired writers to develop their projects. One of the most influential eras is World War II, a war involving many nations of the world. This global conflict has significantly shaped the political, social, and economic environment, causing a lasting impact on the distribution of power dynamics. A race was declared for military dominance, and all measures were deployed as they spared no expenses. Ultimately, during the Second World War, as the United States was trying to take the lead, they brought to life the infamous Manhattan Project. It was all about developing a mass destructive weapon, the nuclear bomb. In fact, other nations like Russia, Britain, and Japan

attempted to make the bomb, yet only the U.S. succeeded in time, with the help of British scientists, and mainly thanks to their intellectuals and funds (F.G. Gosling vii).

Such monumental historical events have always captivated the attention of filmmakers who explore their lasting impact. There is a variety of works in the historical drama genre, including numerous ones about the Manhattan Project, more precisely about its director, J. Robert Oppenheimer. One of the most innovative movie directors of the century and a real visionary in his field is Christopher Nolan. In the 2023 interview entitled “Christopher Nolan Breaks Down ‘Oppenheimer’ With Professor Brian Cox”, Nolan explains how he learned about Oppenheimer in the eighties through a song titled *Russians* by Sting, who refers to “Oppenheimer’s Deadly Toys”. However, his fascination sparked later on in his life, wondering about the ethical and moral struggles the scientist had to experience during the Manhattan Project (0:53). Eventually, in the summer of 2023, his passion for this subject materialized into the blockbuster film *Oppenheimer*.

The almost billion-dollar-grossing film is an immersive and heart-pounding experience. Nolan traces the story of Oppenheimer and his role with the atomic bomb, relying heavily on the 2005 biographical book *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer* by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin. His main objective is to immerse the audience in the complexities of the scientist’s troubled mind. The film portrays Oppenheimer switching between being a physicist and embracing leadership in a strictly government-controlled area known as Los Alamos, New Mexico. The movie hits its climax in July 1945 as the world witnesses the first atomic explosion, triggering a chain reaction of events that affected both the creator and the world.

Although the movie is an accurate nonlinear retelling of historical events, the character of Oppenheimer is the unstable but somehow grounding lifeline that the director uses to captivate his audience. J. Robert Oppenheimer is an American physicist born in a

wealthy Jewish family (Pais 5). He studied at Harvard, Cambridge, and Gottingen where he made a substantial contribution to the research about quantum mechanics (Pais 8-13). Known as the “father of the atomic bomb,” Oppenheimer is an extensively layered figure. The scale of the nuclear bomb heavily wounded his conscious, leading to deep moral dilemmas. Over time, his loud reticence about the use of the A-bomb and the development of the hydrogen bomb led to political persecution, resulting in the tragic fall that Christopher Nolan embodied in *Oppenheimer*.

Previously, various studies extended on J. Robert Oppenheimer and the subjects surrounding him. We can find academic works tackling his life, moral struggles, and scientific achievements. He inspired many people from different fields to develop relevant projects about him, even decades after his death.

The Review of Literature

In his article “Oppenheimer’s Dilemma: A Marxian Examination of Power Dynamics and Ethical Justifications in Nolan’s *Oppenheimer*,” published in 2023, S. Z. Abbas explores the application of Marxist theory to Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer*, in the context of cinema and Hollywood, and how it capitalizes the weapon industry. He dives deeper into the real intentions and ethics behind the project. Abbas dedicates his words to arguing about how politicians weaponize and utilize intellectuals, including the hectic power dynamics between them. In this case, it is with the Hiroshima nuclear bombing, where it is believed that it was a justified act in order to achieve peace (14-15). The author goes further by explaining the protagonist’s psyche, struggling between the burden of his creation and his commitment to his nation. Furthermore, the author explores the commodification that has been made in the movie as a means to show the audience the complexities scientists face (15-16). Focusing on Oppenheimer, the author reports the consequences of being caught between his own

conscious and the national interests. He proceeds by showing how volatile decision-making happens in the boardrooms, causing actions with irreversible results (16).

«*Oppenheimer*, film de Christopher Nolan, 2023, 180 min», Les scientifiques face aux militaires, aux politiques et à leur conscience by Jacques Bordé et Annick Suzor-Weiner is a 2023 French journal article that explores the main plot of *Oppenheimer*. The authors develop about the division within the scientific community because of World War, between those who are morally compromised and those who are terrified of the outcome. Oppenheimer himself faces this dilemma as he fully supports the project, and later regrets everything, resulting in tremendous guilt and trauma (4). In addition, the article elaborates on where Oppenheimer stands on the use of the nuclear bomb, and his reticence against developing the hydrogen bomb, as well as the necessity to share the knowledge acquired with every other nation (5). Moreover, Bordé and Suzor-Weiner tackle the response he received from his peers who were quick to accuse him of communism, to completely take away his security clearances (6).

In “The Gita of J. Robert Oppenheimer”, released in June 2000, James A. Hijiya delves into Oppenheimer’s famous quote, “Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds,” and how it comes from the scientist’s interpretation of the Hindu scripture the Bhargava-Gita. The author analyzes the moral and intellectual influence that Sanskrit had on the scientists during the Manhattan Project period (125). He explains how Oppenheimer structured his life around the three pillars of the Gita: duty, fate and faith. According to the author, his philosophical interpretations allowed him to detach himself from his actions and justify them as essential to his role as a scientist. Moreover, he criticizes his selective reading of the Gita and raises an important question that Oppenheimer might be appropriating the religious text to evade taking full accountability (133-156). The article cleverly uses Oppenheimer to portray how religious and philosophical texts can shape the perspective of scientists around

the world and influence their moral debates on the ethical implications of technological innovation.

American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer (2005) is a comprehensive biography of J. Robert Oppenheimer written by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin. This work is based on extensive research of FBI files, thousands of letters from archives and multiple interviews with the scientist, his peers, and relatives. In part four, chapter twenty-three, entitled “Those Poor Little People”, the authors focus on Oppenheimer's intellectual and emotional mayhem following the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. His complex psychological state is highlighted by the struggle he goes through concerning the bomb's use, from the initial celebration of his achievement to a profound sense of regret. The title, being a quote from Oppenheimer himself, is a pure reflection of the overwhelming guilt he felt following the devastating civilian casualties.

Additionally, chapter twenty-eight, “He Couldn't Understand Why He Did It” reinforces the same idea as the previous one. It goes further by exploring Oppenheimer's cognitive dissonance as a result of trying to reconcile his major contribution to the making of the A-bomb and his moral compass. He even goes back as far as questioning his earliest decision of getting involved in the Manhattan Project, despite his awareness of the colossal destruction it would eventually cause.

“The Beast in the Jungle” is chosen by the authors to be the title of chapter thirty-three as it symbolizes a deep inner conflict. It is inspired by the title of Henry James's novella published in 1903. When it comes to Oppenheimer, this concept reflects his never-ending contemplation concerning the relevance of his monstrous creation, a lifetime of psychological struggle, emphasizing the clash between science and morals.

Published in September 2023, “Review – Oppenheimer” is a review of the *Oppenheimer* movie by Christopher Nolan, written by Martin Duffy, discussing the role of

Oppenheimer in the creation of the atomic bomb. Duffy explores the moral dilemmas faced by Oppenheimer as he addressed his concerns about developing such a mass destructive power. He highlights the conflict between scientific responsibility and moral implications, especially in Oppenheimer's fear of the Nazis developing the same weapon. The author goes further by exploring that despite these concerns, there is an evolving rational and moral justification from Oppenheimer for the use of the bomb on Japanese territory. However, this argument was deemed naive by historians and international relations experts (1). Moreover, Duffy notes the growing sense of guilt surrounding Oppenheimer after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Perceiving himself as "Death, the destroyer of worlds," is a pure reflection of the ongoing torment he experienced due to the consequences of his innovation (2).

Perry Aw's "Film Review: Oppenheimer", is a 2023 review of the movie featured on the Medium that brings up the very interesting aspect of how J. Robert Oppenheimer's naivety and lack of expertise in international relations will eventually cause his downfall. The author explains that Oppenheimer's confidence while developing the bomb was rooted in his belief that he would always maintain control over the deployment of his prodigy. Therefore, the moment he loses agency over the bomb is pivotal and marks the beginning of his psychological torment. Additionally, it leads him to become an advocate for arms control. Perry Aw further explains how Oppenheimer ends up expressing himself over his beliefs of doing the right thing which eventually leads to losing his credibility and allowing the Washington political scene the opportunity to strip him of his security clearance. The author then shifts the focus to Lewis Strauss, describing him as the pillar opposite of Oppenheimer and rather a real mastermind at playing the Washington political game. He explains how Strauss's animosity and loathing towards Oppenheimer is displaced and based on unrealistic prejudice. However, when Strauss confronts another skilled politician, he finds himself

defending Oppenheimer, mainly because he is now in the same position as him. In this moment, Strauss comes to understand that what he previously perceived as naivety may not have been a flaw but rather a reflection of a human response: the courage to act morally, even when vulnerable, a simple concept but foreign and unimaginable according to the circumstances.

Another valuable piece of media in understanding Oppenheimer is a 2023 YouTube interview titled *Christopher Nolan Breaks Down Oppenheimer with Brian Cox*, a conversation between the movie director and the physicist Brian Cox that blends cinematic criticism with scientific reflections. Moreover, Nolan offers great insight into the thematic of the film, the structure he decided upon, and the character's psychology. The director discusses the moral and psychological dilemmas Oppenheimer and the other scientists included in the Manhattan Project had to face and the complexity behind their decision-making process. Additionally, he highlights the possibility of a chain reaction that could destroy the world as a dramatic moment in history that he wanted to share with his audience.

Brian Cox brings up the interesting dual structure of the film, how the image switches from color to black and white, to which the director explains that the colored part is the most significant, which is Oppenheimer's subjective fragmented narrative, in contrast, the black and white scenes are Lewis Strauss's character a more objective and judgmental take on the scientist. Furthermore, about the narrative structure, he delves into the process behind choosing to start the story through quantum mechanics, and how important it was for him to capture the imagery behind the atom in so many different manners and forms. Another relevant moment to emphasize is Nolan's interest in portraying the duality of Oppenheimer, a very eloquent man who never apologized for his actions; however, all his attempts to influence policies after 1945 are those of a guilty man very aware of the consequences of his

creation. As the director himself acknowledges the moral ambiguity and the different aspects of his film, this interview deepens and supports critical readings of *Oppenheimer*.

In his interview with NPR's *Fresh Air* (2023), Christopher Nolan sheds light on the psychological core of *Oppenheimer* (2023) with Terry Gross. The director emphasizes that he was fascinated by the complexity of "the pivot between the successful Trinity test and then the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki," explaining how Oppenheimer is achieving an extraordinary scientific breakthrough while simultaneously confronting devastating moral consequences. He goes further accentuating the turmoil the scientists went through during the Manhattan Project saying "they had no choice" their country needed them and that the Nazis were an urgent threat, hence suggesting that the pressure left little room for moral doubts. Nolan also describes the film as subjective, following Oppenheimer's experience with the creation of the atomic bomb.

Moreover, he explains how the film centers on the protagonist's internal crisis, struggling with feelings of triumph and unbearable guilt following the success of Trinity. Nolan continues by linking Oppenheimer's dilemma with contemporary AI scientists and how they talk about "their Oppenheimer moment", referring to creating something that may have terrible consequences. In this conversation, Nolan conveys the main objective of his movie; it is a deep portrayal of the psychological burden scientists carry, specifically Oppenheimer. It explores the inner conflicts, moral crises, and the human cost of scientific discovery.

The Statement of the Problem

Christopher Nolan's movie *Oppenheimer* received a host of critics and swept multiple awards, which subjected it to thorough scrutiny. However, because of the film's recent release, it has not yet been explored through various critical lenses. This attracted our

attention to profoundly explore the moral dilemmas, responsibilities, and psychological burdens associated with scientific advancement. The film offers a rich foundation for examining how complex historical, political, and personal narratives interweave to highlight the challenges of wielding immense knowledge and power. Through Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer* (2023), this study will explore J. Robert Oppenheimer's psyche in relation to the moral dimensions of scientific discovery. This research will investigate the complex layers of Oppenheimer's psyche, examining how internal forces such as ambition and repressed guilt, as well as external pressures including patriotic duty and political manipulation, converge to shape his decisions, his internal conflict, and ultimately the legacy he leaves behind.

In order to properly explore this theme, we lean towards psychoanalysis as a literary theory. This leads us to Sigmund Freud, whose psychoanalytic theories of the Id, ego, and superego represent the three components of the human psyche that interact and shape the individual's behavior. Thus, to understand Oppenheimer's mind, it is essential to analyze these three distinct components to gain a deeper insight into his personality and psychological dynamics. In literature, psychoanalysis is a prominent literary theory used to analyze and interpret literary texts. To apply this theory, it is required to explore the unconscious motivations, desires, conflicts, fears, and unresolved trauma. It will eventually lead us to examining the character's thoughts, behavior, and relationships in order to uncover deeper psychological meanings.

Applying this theory on *Oppenheimer* will help us study the protagonist's psyche and the internal struggle he faces with the conflict between his responsibility as a scientist and his moral values, uncovering his psychological dilemmas. What drove him to get involved with the Manhattan Project? How did it affect his perspective? What did witnessing his creation

trigger within his psyche? And how did facing the consequences of the A-bomb cause his tragic downfall?

Chapter Division

To address the objectives of this research and provide a thorough psychoanalytic reading of Oppenheimer's character, this study is divided into two main chapters. The first gives a general overview of the background surrounding our topic, and the second offers a detailed analysis of the protagonist's psyche.

Our first chapter, titled "The Road to the Atomic Bomb: From Oppenheimer's Rise to Nolan's Vision", focuses on establishing the necessary historical and theoretical framework of this research. It begins by positioning *Oppenheimer* within the real-world socio-historical context, focusing on the geopolitical tensions during World War II, the U.S. involvement, and the development of the Manhattan Project, centering on J. Robert Oppenheimer. This is in order to deeply understand the ideological and moral tensions portrayed in the film. The chapter then shifts toward the cinematic elements, offering insight into Christopher Nolan's filmmaking style and a synopsis of his movie. Finally, it includes information about the psychoanalytic theory, specifically Freudian. We expand on his theories about the three components of the mind, the conscious and unconscious, the exploration of dreams, repression, and the death drive, which will help us uncover the protagonist's psyche.

Chapter two is about the exploration of the psychological downfall of J. Robert Oppenheimer, following his shift from a celebrated scientist to a tormented figure consumed by the consequences of his creation. Entitled "From Patriot to Pariah: Oppenheimer's Tragic Shift between Scientific Glory to Moral Anguish," this chapter is divided into two main sections; the first one is about Unraveling Oppenheimer's Psyche, highlighting the psychological forces that motivated Oppenheimer to undertake the ultimate mission of

creating the A-bomb. This includes his relentless scientific ambition, the rational justifications he deeply internalized added to patriotism, and the complex emergence of his moral dilemmas. We also give special attention to the climactic moment of the Trinity Test, which is portrayed not as a definitive victory but as an ephemeral event that hides the beginning of emotional collapse. As for the second section, we focus on the Moral Awakening and Psychological collapse, spreading over the period that followed the horrifying event of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which highlights Oppenheimer's psyche. Drawing from Freudian theories of repression and the death drive, we explore the main character's overwhelming burden he carried as the father of the atomic bomb and his ultimate personal and political downfall.

CHAPTER ONE

The Road to the Bomb: From Historical Reality to Nolan's Vision and Freud's Mindscape

Introduction

This chapter is dedicated to the exploration of the socio-historical background that revolves around *Oppenheimer*. It includes an overview of World War II, focusing on the United States' involvement and the events surrounding the atomic bomb's creation. Therefore, we will shed light on the Manhattan Project and share some biographical elements about its director, J. Robert Oppenheimer. Moreover, this chapter provides relevant information about the movie director Christopher Nolan, his artistic style, and his film *Oppenheimer* (2023). At last, we will expand on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis as a literary theory that we will apply throughout this present research.

I. Historical Overview

In order to grasp the context of our analysis, it is essential to lay out the socio-historical landscape that shaped both the events depicted in the film and the real-life figure of Oppenheimer. Understanding the events surrounding World War II, the Manhattan Project, and Oppenheimer's background will provide the necessary framework for a deeper reading of the film.

1. World War II: The Shift from Europe to the U.S.

1.1. Europe in Turmoil

The fight for territories in Europe ultimately led to what is known as the Great War, later called World War I (1914-1918), which eventually ended after four years. However, its consequences left all countries displeased after the Treaty of Versailles in 1918, yearning for more satisfactory resolutions. Additionally, tensions were building in Japan and China, "But the partial economic recovery and political reconciliation of Europe were extremely fragile, as was the great power cooperation and relative tranquility in the Far East." (Lyons 26). This

called forth another course of conflicts, shattering the fragile treaties that maintained a sort of peace and order, fuelling World War II in September 1939.

The emergence of totalitarian rule postwar was partly driven by the struggle the newly formed nations faced in acclimating to democracy and accepting a stable political system, and it was further intensified by the Great Depression that left the countries completely destabilized. This period of loss and uncertainty played an essential role in the rise of dictatorial regimes. Fascism in Italy, Nazism in Germany, the USSR, and Japan all adopted totalitarian political structures and invested their energy and effort in controlling citizens and communities. These political strategies were unpopular from the start, yet they gained major support due to successful propaganda and the omnipresent fear that motivated the masses (Lyons 27). Meanwhile, although the Allies, composed of France, the United Kingdom, China and Italy, came out victorious from WWI, the latter switching sides and the U.S. isolation weakened their position, leaving them exposed to the Axis threat. Eventually, France fell into the hands of Germany, causing for the UK to be left standing alone.

The increasing vulnerability of European powers contributed to the United States' decision to intervene. Yet, this involvement was not solely altruistic, it also presented a strategic opportunity to shift the global balance of power and solidify American dominance.

1.2. The Intervention of the United States in WWII

The United States had a unique position during World War II, as it was isolated from the chaos in Europe by the Atlantic Ocean. At the onset of the war, America preferred to remain uninvolved in the European conflict. It is accurate to say that the primary reason for the U.S. entering the war was its feud with Japan. The attack on Pearl Harbor was the direct catalyst for America's involvement. Japanese carrier planes struck the American fleet at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, knocking out over 200 planes and sinking or damaging eight battleships. On

the day following December 7, 1941, President Roosevelt declared that America was officially joining the fight, confidently predicting victory. America's involvement changed drastically the power balance and provided the Allies with the morale boost they desperately needed.

2. The Manhattan Project

America's biggest contribution to WWII lies without a doubt in the nuclear weapon area. The U.S. was already investigating the nuclear field even before joining the fight; yet, it was not until the uranium fission was discovered that scientists truly realized the magnitude of its potential in nuclear engineering. It was no longer a question of if, but rather when and who was going the first to lay their hands on weapons made out of this new emerging discovery.

In 1939, Leo Szilard and Eugene Wigner, theoretical physicists, had both witnessed the rise of totalitarianism in their native Hungary, pushing them to immigrate to the U.S. They foresaw the chaos that would have unraveled if Germany secures enough uranium. With the assistance of Einstein, they urgently sent a letter to President Roosevelt informing him of "not only the importance of uranium ores but also the possibility of the development of a powerful new type of bomb." (Reed 11-12). As a result, Roosevelt formed the Uranium Committee in charge of collecting and investigating the potential of uranium, as well as developing nuclear fission on a broader scope.

After Pearl Harbor in the spring of 1942, a collaboration with the British committee was formed to take the initiative further in the creation of nuclear weapons. They promptly recognized that the only organization with the budget to fund the project is the Corps of Engineering of the United States Army. The project was transferred to the army, whose headquarters are located in Manhattan under the supervision of Colonel Leslie R. Groves. In

early 1943, they relocated to Los Alamos, New Mexico, a new strategic site where they built a fully functioning town with the best-equipped physics laboratory in the world dedicated to the development of the atomic bomb. The Manhattan Project was directed by no other than the father of the atomic bomb, J. Robert Oppenheimer, alongside him, 2200 employees in all sorts of fields, and it amounted to approximately two billion dollars at that time.

The scientists' work consisted of using the principle of nuclear fission, a process where the nucleus of a heavy element, such as Uranium-235 or Plutonium-239, splits when struck by a neutron, releasing immense energy. This reaction sets off a chain reaction, as the neutrons produced by each fission event trigger further fissions. Uranium-235 was critical due to its fissile nature, meaning it could sustain these reactions. This process was far more powerful than chemical explosives due to the conversion of a small amount of mass into energy (Reed 2-11). Their goal was to harness these discoveries for military purposes by solving the technical and engineering challenges of designing and building the first atomic bomb.

The experimental work in Los Alamos concluded after creating two atomic bombs, Little Boy and Fat Man. However, out of fear of failure and in order to avoid risks of leaving intact materials that could be recovered by the enemy forces, they conducted a successful test detonation of a third bomb, named Trinity, at dawn on July 16, 1945. Trinity established the beginning of a new age; it not only represents a triumphant creation, but also a means of dominance and irrevocable danger.

The decision to drop the bombs was not taken lightly; nevertheless, Japan's refusal to surrender and the U.S.'s need to assert their position of power urged them to act. On August 6, 1945, a special Army Air Force unit released Little Boy on Hiroshima, a city chosen due to its military significance (Reed 24). Inevitably, 66 000 died, and 69 000 were injured (Wellerstein). Despite the horrific outcome, Japan was still not ready to admit defeat. Due to

this, President Truman authorized a second strike on Kokura, but Fat Man ended up landing on Nagasaki on August 9, 1945 due to bad weather (Reed 25). More than 39 000 people died and 25 000 were injured, which in both cities later succumbed to their injuries (Wellerstein). On the 15th, “Emperor Hirohito specifically referred to ‘a new and most cruel bomb’ as one of the reasons for accepting surrender terms” (Reed 25), marking the end of World War II.

The Manhattan Project marked a turning point in both science and warfare, strengthening U.S. power while raising deep ethical concerns. At the heart of this groundbreaking mission stood J. Robert Oppenheimer, a man whose brilliance and inner conflict would come to define the era.

3. J. Robert Oppenheimer’s Life and Intellectual Journey

3.1. Early Life

J. Robert Oppenheimer was born on April 22, 1904, in New York to a wealthy family of Jewish heritage. His father, Julius Oppenheimer, immigrated to America from Germany at only 17. He hardly knew the language, but starting from scratch, he managed to build a thriving business in textile importation. He acquired a taste for finer things and mostly arts, which brought him to meet his future wife, Ella Friedman. Coming from a long line of European Jewish descendants, her family had lived for generations in Baltimore and Philadelphia. Ella moved to New York, where she became an accomplished painter alongside being a teacher of art (Pais 4).

After their marriage, their first child was J. Robert, and later they also had Frank, who followed in his brother’s footsteps and became a scientist. Raised privileged, Robert lived in a luxurious apartment facing the Hudson River, a summer house in Long Island, and a private art collection.

As a child, Robert was disinterested in “normal” children’s activities and did not socialize with kids of his age. Instead, he was fascinated by mineralogy, writing poems, and reading classics such as Homer, Plato, and T.S. Eliot (Pais 5-6). Although this makes him somewhat of a precocious child, he was still able to grow up in a healthy and supportive environment.

3.2. Education

Oppenheimer attended the Ethical Culture School, a prestigious institution where his passion for science grew, especially after being heavily influenced by his physics and chemistry high school teacher. Following his graduation, he took a gap year due to a serious illness he contracted during a summer trip to Europe. He then joined Harvard University at 18 in September 1922, majoring in chemistry. He began to gravitate towards physics, with a preference for experimental work over theoretical studies. Oppenheimer managed to graduate in less than three years, rather than the standard four, in 1925. The same year, he was integrated into Cambridge University in England, but he struggled with experimental physics, as he lacked the patience and precision required for laboratory work. He grew frustrated which led him to face mental health issues that even drove him to take action against his tutor Patrick Blackett by attempting to poison him (Pais 13). Ultimately, this led to Robert being put on probation and regular sessions with a psychiatrist.

University of Göttingen in Germany was Oppenheimer’s next stop, where he studied under Max Born and contributed in quantum mechanics. His social life improved there, and he thrived intellectually in an environment that constantly challenged his thinking. The shift into theoretical physics was a step towards betterment, but not enough to fully mend his mental state; instead, his struggles became a constant presence, one he learned to live with

over time. Eventually, J. Robert Oppenheimer got his PhD in physics at just 23 years old in 1927.

3.3. Academic Career

After two years in Europe, Oppenheimer returned to the U.S. and started working as a postdoctoral fellow at institutions like Caltech and Berkeley. Soon after he went back, this time to the Netherlands to work at the University of Leiden; however, he did not linger there for long. In 1929, now in the States, he began teaching as an assistant professor at Berkeley and Caltech, and it was not until 1936 that he became a full professor in both. He was very well appreciated by his students and known for his deep intellect, being sharp, and deeply inspiring (Pais 21-22).

Oppenheimer made important contributions to theoretical physics, including work on quantum mechanics and quantum electrodynamics. He was also doing research and contributing in early theories about neutron stars and black holes, as he was passionate about the cosmic rays. Additionally, he investigated nuclear reactions and energy processes, which was the beginning of a long journey in this field.

In 1939, Oppenheimer met Katherine “Kitty” Puening (1910-1972), a German-born who had moved to Pittsburgh. She was known for having joined the communist party through her previous marriage with a communist, although she had officially left in 1936. Kitty was married while having an affair with Robert, and in 1940, she got divorced and married him in November of the same year. The couple had their first child, Peter, and later a daughter named Katherine.

3.4. Scientific Involvement in Wartime Efforts

Oppenheimer’s path to the development of the atomic bomb began at Berkeley in 1941, where his research in nuclear physics and growing connections with leading scientists

positioned him as a key figure in the field. Following the events of Pearl Harbor, Robert was made director of the S-1, a section responsible for uranium work part of the United States Office of Scientific Research and Development (OSRD). The main objective was to be ahead in the development of fission weapon against Germany. Shortly after, Oppenheimer was approached by Colonel Groves to be the head of a military project called Project Y, a code name for the atomic bomb (Pais 40). In March 1943, they relocated to Los Alamos, New Mexico, where they directed all their efforts in building the ultimate weapon, the atomic bomb. Their work proved to be successful with the Trinity test, the first detonation of an atomic bomb, leading J. Robert Oppenheimer to famously quote, “Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds” (40).

3.5. Post War Years

Despite Oppenheimer’s major role in Los Alamos, the feeling of guilt that followed the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, adding to his tumultuous relationship with the government, made him resign his position as director and accept a post at Caltech. In the next years, he started to publicly express his reticence about the spread of nuclear weapons and complete opposition to the development of the hydrogen bomb. In 1954, Oppenheimer was called before a security hearing, where his past political association with the communist party, particularly his brother and wife, both former communists, and perceived disloyalty regarding classified military projects, led to the revocation of his security clearance.

Oppenheimer went on with his life to become the director of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton and received the Enrico Fermi Award from the president of the U.S., a prize to honor scientists as a gesture of political rehabilitation (Pais 295).

As his career wound down, Oppenheimer was diagnosed with throat cancer due to heavy smoking, and on February 18th, 1967, the father of the atomic bomb died in Princeton

at the age of 62. Despite having a short life, the scientist left a lasting impact on nuclear physics and inspired generations to come in all sorts of fields. Oppenheimer's life and legacy have compelled authors and filmmakers, including *American Prometheus* by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin and *Oppenheimer* (2023) by Christopher Nolan.

II. Contextualizing Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer*

To fully grasp the depth of *Oppenheimer* and its psychological dimensions, it is essential to first establish the biographical, cinematic, and theoretical ground upon which the analysis is built. This section offers a brief overview of Christopher Nolan's directorial approach and outlines the film's narrative structure.

1. Christopher Nolan's Life and Filmmaking Career

The twenty-first century is marked by the booming of the cinematic industry, revolutionized by new filmmaking technologies. One of the most innovative directors is the two-time Academy Award winner Christopher Nolan, whose style of storytelling and visual effects is unique.

Born on July 30, 1970, in London, England, Nolan was interested in filmmaking from an early age. He first attended a boarding school and finished his education at University College London, where he studied English Literature while making short films. During this time, he met his future spouse Emma Thomas, with whom he repeatedly collaborated and created their own production company (Albert) (IMDb).

Nolan released his first film in 1998 called *Following* with a very low budget, yet he succeeded in gaining recognition and credibility among his peers. *Memento* (2000) was the breakthrough for which he was acclaimed for using non-linear storytelling. Nolan made his Hollywood debut with *Insomnia* (2002), a psychological thriller starring Al Pacino. His

career took a bigger turn after producing *The Batman Trilogy Begins: Batman Begins* (2005), where he reinvented the superhero genre with a darker, more realistic portrayal. This continued with *The Dark Knight* (2008) being one of the greatest superhero films of all time, with a legendary performance by Heath Ledger. The writer and director proceeded to reinvent himself with other films like *Inception* (2010), *Interstellar* (2014), and *Dunkirk* (2017). His work led him to become an Oscar winner with *Oppenheimer* (2023), opening the door for future nominations with his ambitious upcoming project, an adaptation of *The Odyssey* by Homer (IMDb).

Christopher Nolan is known for his preference to use IMAX technology, practical effects, minimal CGI, and strong visual effects to give his audience an epic, immersive experience. His plots are also characterized by non-linearity, the exploration of time and reality, and complex intellectual themes to deeply dive into less explored territories and create momentum (M and Hemmige 78-79).

The British-American director earned his place as one of the most respected figures in modern cinema; he has even been knighted by King Charles III and now goes by Sir Christopher Nolan (IMDb). He is a great inspiration to other filmmakers and is recognized for pushing the boundaries of conventional cinema.

2. *Oppenheimer* (2023): A Film Synopsis

Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer* movie is an interpretation of J. Robert Oppenheimer's life and a reenactment of historical events surrounding him, all inspired by the biography *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (2005), written by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin. The plot follows a non-linear structure and is divided into three main parts: "Fission", "Fusion", and the aftermath during which all major events occur; however, the audience is constantly pulled back to the 1954 security

hearing of Oppenheimer and the 1959 Strauss confirmation hearing as the film's central axis.

J. Robert Oppenheimer (Cillian Murphy) is introduced as a young, ambitious physicist student in Cambridge and then Germany, where he contributed to the revolutionary subject of quantum mechanics. After getting his PhD, he returned to the U.S. to teach at Berkeley and Caltech as a pioneer theoretical physicist.

During this period, Oppenheimer becomes involved with left-wing politics, starts to socialize with communist activists, including his lover Jean Tatlock (Florence Pugh) and his brother Frank Oppenheimer. He later meets his future wife, Kitty (Emily Blunt), with whom he has two children.

With the events of World War II escalating, Oppenheimer is approached by General Leslie Groves (Matt Damon) to lead the Manhattan Project with to develop the first atomic bomb before Nazi Germany. With a team of expert scientists, including Edward Teller and Ernest Lawrence, they head to Los Alamos, New Mexico. Despite encountering complications with the government due to concerns over his past communist ties, he still manages to keep his position. On July 16, 1945, Oppenheimer and his team witnessed the detonation of the world's first atomic bomb. The whole scenery was astonishing yet haunting, a pivotal moment for both Oppenheimer and history.

Following Trinity and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, two sides of Oppenheimer are revealed, on one hand, the acclaimed hero of the nation, featured on the covers of magazines and making public appearances as the face of the scientist behind the bomb. On the other hand, the burdened scientist tormented by guilt and advocated for control and diplomacy of atomic energy. He then meets with President Harry Truman, famously declaring, "Mr. President, I feel I have blood on my hands" (*Oppenheimer* 2:11:23), a confession that Truman dismisses, showing little sympathy for Oppenheimer's remorse.

Now comes the infamous brutal security hearing that resulted in Oppenheimer losing his security clearance. In 1954, with the help of William L. Borden (David Dastmalchian), Lewis Strauss (Robert Downey Jr.) orchestrated the downfall of Oppenheimer due to his resentment towards his opposition to the hydrogen bomb. During the hearing, many of Oppenheimer's old friends and colleagues testified against him, while Kitty defended him. During Strauss's Senate confirmation hearing for Secretary of Commerce in 1959, his true motivations regarding Oppenheimer's demise are uncovered. Driven by pure resentment and a one-sided rivalry, Strauss believes that Oppenheimer vilified him during a conversation with Albert Einstein (Tom Conti). Moreover, he publicly humiliated him when he dismissed his interest in exporting radioactive isotopes. This revelation contributes to Strauss's fall from grace, ultimately leading to the rejection of his nomination.

The last moments of the film bring us back to 1947, where the conversation between Oppenheimer and Einstein is revealed. The two scientists speak of the burden of their creation, and Einstein reflects on how, over time, the government tends to turn their backs on the very people they once celebrated. Oppenheimer then goes and shares his fear that they started an unbreakable chain reaction of nuclear arms race that will one day destroy the world. The final scene shows a montage of nuclear explosions consuming planet Earth.

III. The Theoretical Framework

This section presents the psychoanalytic framework of the research paper, drawing on Freudian theories that will guide and structure the upcoming analysis of Oppenheimer.

The Psychoanalysis Theory

Psychoanalysis, as a critical approach to literature, applies the principles of Sigmund Freud's theory to interpret the unconscious mind, repressed desires, and internal conflicts

within literary work. Developed in the early twenty century, psychoanalysis explores the psyche of a character, the author, and even the audience. By focusing on these unconscious processes, it aims to uncover the psychological meanings behind behaviors and narratives (Hossain).

Known for being the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud was a middle-class Jewish Austrian, born in Freiberg in 1856. He was the eldest out of eight siblings and his mother's favorite. Despite his religious heritage, he declared himself liberal minded and an atheist. In 1860, his family moved to Vienna, where he later pursued medicine at the university and got the chance to learn under great professors. At the age of twenty-six, Freud fell in love with a twenty-year-old woman named Martha Bernays. They got married in 1891 and had six children (Quinodoz 10).

Freud treated patients with hysteria and explored an unconventional and fresher therapeutic approach alongside Josef Breuer. His pioneering research on the functional unity of brain cells and nerve fibers, officially presented in 1891 by Heinrich Waldeyer, made him the shadow originator of neuronal theory. Additionally, his publications on aphasia condition where a person loses the ability to understand or produce language, and infantile paralysis are still relevant today, a century later. In 1885, he received the honorary title of Privatdozent, an official recognition in his field that allowed him to teach at the university and give lectures without being an official professor (Quinodoz 10).

He gained international recognition for his work in establishing psychoanalysis as a legitimate field of study. Forced to flee Vienna in 1938 due to Nazi persecution, he sought refuge in London, where he lived until he died in 1939. Freud's work revolutionized the study of the human mind and had a lasting impact on psychotherapy (Quinodoz 10).

In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Freud explains that dreams are a direct manifestation of the unconscious, quoting "The interpretation of dreams is the royal road to a

knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind” (604). He states that they are divided into two forms, manifest content, which is what individuals recall at a surface level, and latent content, which is the concealed thoughts, desires, and repressed memories of the unconscious. Freud also introduced the concept of “dream-work”, the process in which the unconscious mind transforms the repressed latent content into the more adhering manifest content. He believes that dreams are not coincidental and meaningless; rather they offer an insight into the person has veiled emotions.

Freud’s groundbreaking theory claims that human behavior is deeply shaped by the unconscious, particularly repressed desires and unresolved childhood experiences. He theorized that the mind is divided into three distinct parts. The conscious represents all we are aware of, our thoughts and perceptions that we can access at any given moment, and the preconscious consists of knowledge that we can retrieve with effort or deep concentration. Finally, yet importantly, the most important according to him is the unconscious holding deepest desires, fears, and memories that are repressed yet heavily capable of influencing behavior. On the matter, Freud stated, “The unconscious is the true psychological reality; in its innermost nature it is as much unknown to us as the reality of the external world, and it is as incompletely presented by the data of consciousness as is the external world by the communications of our sense organs.” (Freud 1900).

Freud also spoke about repression; he categorized it as one of the most important defense mechanisms and described it as an unconscious process in which individuals isolate and exclude alarming thoughts, desires, or experiences away from the conscious mind. However, it is also impossible for the mind to eliminate these thoughts and impulses; therefore, repression forces them into the unconscious, where they have an impact and influence on behavior. In addition, because repression does not last forever, the repressed elements often manifest in various indirect ways, like dreams, Freudian slips (slips of the

tongue), and neurotic symptoms. By emphasizing repression, Freud decoded how unresolved conflicts and trauma can shape and affect human experience outside of the conscious awareness. (Freud 1915).

After having developed his research more thoroughly, he later found this approach insufficient in order to fully explain the internal conflicts and struggles that people experience. In 1927, he published his book *The Ego and the Id* where he developed a structural division of the psyche made of three interactive parts: the Id, the ego, and the superego. The Id represents the unconscious, primitive instincts of the mind that operate according to the pleasure principle, driven by desires only seeking instant gratification. In contrast, the superego refers to the moral conscience that represents societal rules and values; it operates as some kind of internal court that enforces moral standards. Whereas the ego is a conscious mediator between these two, operating according to the reality principle to balance between the impulsive urges and the commanding voice of the superego. Thus, Freud's updated structural model offers a more comprehensive framework to better understand the complex parts within the psyche.

Throughout the years, Freud's work has been under constant reevaluation; therefore, being the subject of a great deal of criticism. More contemporary research challenges and dismisses his ideas; particularly those related to sexuality and psychosexual development, claiming that his work is outdated and lacks scientific value. However, despite this criticism his contribution to the field of psychoanalysis remains undeniable. His work laid the groundwork for reshaping our perception and understanding of the human mind. Furthermore, it served as the foundation from which many other fields like psychoanalysis literary theory breached from (Veazey).

Through his work, Freud laid the foundation for psychoanalysis by decoding and structuring the complex mechanisms that rule over human thought and behavior. From the

interpretation of dreams to the intricate layers of consciousness, his theories revealed that much of what drives actions is hidden beyond the surface of knowledge. Repression, as a fundamental process, demonstrates how the mind protects itself by burying painful memories into the unconscious, while the superego subtly pushes forward internalized ideals and forbidden desires. Together, these concepts form a comprehensive vision of the psyche, a dynamic and often conflicted system in which some forces exert a large influence over the self.

Conclusion

This chapter's aim is to break down the necessary information for a full analysis of the character of J. Robert Oppenheimer by contextualizing both the historical and cinematic dimensions of Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer*. Starting with a brief overview of World War II, the chapter explores the United States' involvement and its crown jewel, the Manhattan Project, which brought to life the atomic bomb. Additionally, it includes a thorough biography of J. Robert Oppenheimer that inspired the movie director Christopher Nolan to make *Oppenheimer* (2023), and how he wields his original storytelling in order to shed light on Oppenheimer's legacy and the palpable political tension that surrounded him at that time. Beyond the historical and cinematic background, this chapter introduces different theories for a deep and effective analysis of the subject. Following Freudian psychoanalysis theory, it will allow us to understand the complexity and moral dilemmas of Oppenheimer.

CHAPTER TWO

From a Patriot to a Pariah: Oppenheimer's Tragic Shift from Scientific Glory to Moral Anguish

Introduction

This chapter explores Oppenheimer's internal and external motives behind creating the nuclear bomb, from scientific ambition, patriotism, and governmental control to the following moral reckoning. We apply Freud's psychoanalytic theory to examine the protagonist's id, ego, and superego to understand how the enthusiasm and reasoning for the project gradually expose the repression, guilt, and ultimately, psychological collapse. In Christopher Nolan's film, J. Robert Oppenheimer is portrayed as a deeply complex character. He is both a brilliant visionary and a man under emotional discord. The movie depicts his psychological state throughout different periods of his life, torn between ambition, inner conflict and guilt. Cillian Murphy's performance accentuates Oppenheimer's haunted expressions and growing detachment after witnessing the Trinity Test, and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The movie showcases scenes of his distress and mental turmoil through sound and visual distortion, as well as sequences of hallucinations that highlight the consequences of his creation. Oppenheimer's layered psyche is rich and conflicted as the biopic excels in exhibiting his whirlwind mind through innovative visuals and narrative techniques.

Section One: Unraveling Oppenheimer's Psyche

1. The Psychological Forces Behind Oppenheimer's Actions

Human actions are not always guided by pure rationality; they are determined by the layered dynamics of conscious and unconscious desires. Freud's theory of the psyche which divides human behavior into the Id, ego, and superego further explains the process of Oppenheimer's mind and how the dynamics between them create a deep conflict. Taking the lead of the Manhattan project and creating the atomic bomb was not arbitrary but purely driven by various factors that motivated him.

1.1. Oppenheimer's Scientific Ambition

Throughout history, scientists proved that their ambition is purely fueled by curiosity, innovation, and a relentless pursuit of knowledge, establishing it as the driving force that shaped humanity's greatest discoveries. It is an unconscious need to always push the boundaries of nature which aligns with Freud's concept of the Id (1927), the primitive instinctual part of the psyche that lingers for fulfillment without paying attention to consequences (Freud xxii).

Oppenheimer's innate desire is to understand the fundamental laws of the universe. He is overcome by curiosity and determined to master forces beyond human comprehension. His intense fascination, bordering on obsession, with quantum mechanics mirrors his unconscious drive to constantly seek knowledge and explore new horizons.



Figure 1: Oppenheimer attending a lecture on quantum mechanics

From the moment Oppenheimer was introduced to the most advanced and revolutionary ideas in physics of his time, his eagerness to know and learn more awakened. Fueled by the thriving environment of science in Europe, his ambition to absorb as much knowledge as possible grew deeper and became almost an instinctual desire. While he was there, Oppenheimer attended an anticipated lecture about quantum mechanics, given by Neils Bohr (Figure 1). His fascination is accentuated through his visible frustration and impatience when his professor deliberately delayed him from attending the lecture which drove him to the extent of attempting to poison him. This implosive and emotional reaction of the Id

highlights his urging need to learn disregarding consequences. Freud explains when comparing with the ego that the pleasure principle dominates the Id with no restrictions (19).



Figure 2: Oppenheimer's hallucinations of atoms

Figure 2 showcases Oppenheimer's hallucination about atoms that causes him insomnia during his college years in Cambridge. This scene is a visual representation of his unconscious obsession with atomic structures, suggesting the length of how it is rooted in his subconscious. Oppenheimer's Id is taking control over his mind, validating Freud's idea of it operating beyond rational control. *In The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud states that "The dream is the (disguised) fulfillment of a (suppressed, repressed) wish (183). It can be interpreted that these conscious projections are a recurrent feature throughout his life as a form of unconscious reaction to everything he is going through. They are born out of every repressed emotion and thought, randomly surfacing as hallucinations and visions.



Figure 3: Oppenheimer's fascination with quantum mechanics

While in Leiden, Oppenheimer audited a lecture given by the German physicist Werner Heisenberg. During a close-up shot, the director gradually focuses on the protagonist to emphasize his emotions (Figure 3). Oppenheimer appears entranced by the physicist's

every word, his fascination with quantum mechanics goes beyond mere interest proving once again his innate need to absorb everything about this innovation. By the end of the lecture, Heisenberg showed interest in collaborating with Oppenheimer, however, he declined stating that he was going back to the U.S. which confused Heisenberg who said “There’s no one there taking quantum mechanics seriously.” To which he answered “That’s exactly why” (15:50). We deduce from this reply Oppenheimer’s pursuit for greatness, by taking quantum mechanics to his country where research on this new science is lacking, hence his ambition would not only establish him at the forefront of this field but also fulfill his desire to expand its reach, inspire future research, and aspire to initiate the U.S. as a leading force in theoretical physics. This aligns with his Id’s relentless intellectual conquest to satisfy his scientific cravings.

1.2. Patriotism and Rational Justification

In many instances, scientists brought progress to this world not merely for the advancement of science, but also for the glory of their nation. Patriotism is a powerful motivational tool that can be used to rationalize high risk actions, especially ones with moral ambiguity. This allows the human mind to ensure that choices align with logic, hence what Freud calls the ego, stating “The ego represents what may be called reason and common sense, in contrast to the Id, which contains the passions” (19). In the case of Oppenheimer, the decision to accept the lead of the Manhattan project was not just due to his scientific ambition, it was also a response to the geopolitical tensions of his time. He was aware of the Nazi threat and Germany’s potential development of nuclear weapons; therefore he rationalized his involvement as a necessity for national security. Oppenheimer’s ego took the initiative to step up and be the creator of the A-bomb after mediating between personal desires and external realities.

Beyond his sense of patriotism, Oppenheimer's Jewish identity is a key component of the way his ego creates an explanation for his involvement in the Manhattan Project. The reality of Nazi persecution of Jews may have influenced Oppenheimer's reasoning, as it is stressed during a scene that takes place before his involvement in the project.



Figure 4: Oppenheimer's official introduction to the Manhattan project

Over a heated conversation with Ernest Lawrence, Oppenheimer states “and I know what it means for the Nazis to have a bomb.” and then added, “it’s not your people they are herding into camps” (36:59). By framing his scientific ambition as an act of defense against oppression, his ego maintained a mental steadiness to protect him from the guilt he might feel for his wrongdoings. Building a world-destructive weapon may have ethical concerns behind it, yet his ego allows him to stay committed for he sees it as a necessity that can end the war. Another similar moment occurs during his initial introduction to General Groves, who offers him the position of project director (Figure 4). In this exchange, Oppenheimer insists on clarifying who the true enemy is. When Groves insinuates that they are also competing against the Russians in the atomic race, Oppenheimer responds, “Remind me who are we at war with” (46:06). His focus on only defeating Germany while seemingly narrow-minded, reflects his ego's strategy for rationalizing the dangerous undertaking. By concentrating on a singular immediate threat, his ego simplifies the moral complexity of the situation, allowing him to justify his role in the project.



Figure 5: Oppenheimer's reaction to Rabi's moral concerns

A crucial moment during the movie is a conversation Oppenheimer has with Isidor Rabi (Figure 5). He addresses his concerns declaring “You drop a bomb and it falls on the just and unjust, I don’t wish the culmination of three centuries of physics to be a weapon of mass destruction.” The reaction that follows shows that Oppenheimer recognizes Rabi’s preoccupations. Still, his response saying “I don’t know if we can be trusted with such a weapon, but I know the Nazis can’t. We have no choice” (51:02) demonstrates how his ego navigates the psychological conflict around the creation of the nuclear bomb. His ego acts as a defense mechanism trying to rationalize his actions and justify them as being inevitable as Freud says “the ego (which is partly conscious and contains the defense mechanisms and the capacities to calculate, reason, and plan)” (xxii). Instead of confronting the ethical implication of such creation, Oppenheimer hides behind the ultimate justification of preventing the Nazis from acquiring the bomb first. His ego sees that the atomic bomb is an unavoidable reality and seeks to justify it as a necessary evil that can prevent greater chaos. His ego is formed by his patriotic spirit and rationalization over this innovation, seeing it as the ultimate means that will install peace.

1.3. Moral Dilemma

As the development of the atomic bomb evolved, Oppenheimer’s view began to waver. Every step towards its making raises more concerns about its consequences, leading the scientists of the project to face major moral dilemmas. In the *Ego and the Id*, Freud

explains that “From the point of view of instinctual control, of morality, it may be said of the id that it is totally non-moral, of the ego that it strives to be moral, and of the super-ego that it can be super-moral and then become as cruel as only the id can be” (54). Oppenheimer’s approach with the A-bomb is similar, his Id that manifests as scientific ambition is completely carefree, as he strives for accomplishment, while his ego is justifying any moral concerns under the guise of necessity and duty, as for his superego, it is trying to reason and acknowledge the moral weight behind such innovation. In multiple instances, he is confronted with the reality of his creation due to many encounters and historical changes, but his ego overrides them, creating a growing turmoil.



Figure 6: Oppenheimer consulting Einstein

In this scene (Figure 6), Oppenheimer and Albert Einstein discuss the terrifying possibility that his creation may destroy the world. The probability of the bomb triggering an atomic chain reaction, however slim, represents the ultimate moral dilemma for Oppenheimer. His superego manifests in his fear and distress regarding what it means to proceed with the making of the first atomic bomb and the risk of igniting the atmosphere. His anxiety and distress reflect an awareness that he is tampering with forces beyond his control. The scene’s tension shows that while his superego is not strong enough to stop him, it causes hesitation.

In 1927, Freud argued that the superego develops in response to authority figures “as the child was once under a compulsion to obey its parents, so the ego submits to the categorical imperative of its super-ego” (Freud 43). The parents serve as moral authority, which in our context is Einstein, someone Oppenheimer both admires and fears judgment

from. When his research reveals a potential catastrophic outcome, Einstein faces him with the harsh truth saying, “Then you stop. And you share your findings with the Nazis. So neither side destroys the world” (55:30) he embodies the superego playing the role of the moral conscience as he confronts the physicist’s scientific ambition by challenging his approach to knowledge. Their conversation is not just about physics but a moment of moral reckoning, urging Oppenheimer to recognize that science cannot be pursued recklessly.



Figure 7: Oppenheimer and Niels Bohr

At the beginning of the movie, one significant scene is in Cambridge, where Oppenheimer is eager to attend a lecture by Niels Bohr on quantum mechanics. This scientist has always been a great inspiration for him, and while working on the Manhattan Project, one of his important requests is to bring Bohr to U.S. territory and have him join this journey. Eventually, Groves managed to evacuate Bohr knowing his knowledge of nuclear physics is crucial. However, Niels Bohr’s plan is different; in fact, he tells Oppenheimer that he is not going to help, nevertheless, he gives him something far more important than his contribution (Figure 7). Bohr says “The power you’re revealing will forever outlive the Nazis. And the world is not prepared” (1:26:23) which initiates a shift in Oppenheimer’s psyche. His initial justification for creating the bomb was to stop Hitler, but here Bohr pushes him to confront the real truth that the bomb represents far more than just in the context of war. Instead of becoming yet another guiding figure that will help him rationalize the bomb, Bohr reinforces his growing awareness that the power he is about to unleash is an irreversible transformation of the world as they know it.

Oppenheimer's response to Bohr's truth indicates that he indeed acknowledges the consequences of this scientific pursuit, as he quotes, "You could lift the stone without being ready for the snake that's revealed." He faces how they might be neglecting and underestimating the moral weight of the creation of the bomb, suggesting that Bohr succeeded in implanting the seed that would help Oppenheimer's superego to manifest gradually. Until now, his ego allowed him to suppress moral doubts, although his anticipated reunion with Bohr takes a complete different turn that activated his superego. It is not just a matter of diminishing the Nazi forces; it is about unleashing a new power that the world may not be ready for.

Bohr's final words are symbolic to the movie, as he goes saying, "You're an American Prometheus. The man who gave them the power to destroy themselves" (1:26:42). He encapsulates Oppenheimer's tragic position by calling him Prometheus, a Titan in Greek mythology who gave fire to humanity. However, this act was a double-edged sword that led to both enlightenment and suffering. By creating the nuclear bomb, Oppenheimer similarly grants humanity power and destruction.



Figure 8: Scientist's meeting after Hitler's death

In *Oppenheimer*, Christopher Nolan purposefully structures the opinion of the scientists in Los Alamos and Leo Szilard's petition against the use of the bomb as a crucial moment to grasp Oppenheimer's superego. By doing that, he exposes the deep moral conflict between his ingrained values and his professional obligations. Freud's concept of the

superego acts as the internalized moral authority shaped by societal expectations, which is conveyed by the voices from the scientific community of Los Alamos who urge him to reconsider the use of the bomb after Hitler's death. The petition serves as a symbol that places Oppenheimer on a dividing path, obliged to choose between expressing his support to the scientists advocating for restraint, or continuing on the path dictated by his duty to the government and the project.

During the period impending Germany's defeat, the scientists at Los Alamos held a meeting to discuss the meaning of their work (Figure 8). Hornig, who appeared to be leading the movement, states, "It's no longer the enemy who are the greatest threat to mankind, it's our work" (01:35:08), articulating the shift in perspective. Until now they justified the creation of a weapon of mass destruction through the lens of war, the Nazi's imminent surrender allowed the moral weight of their action to catch up to them. This realization indicates a moral conflict, their scientific ambition (Id) and wartime justification (ego) now interfere with their moral conscience (superego).

As the leader of the project, Oppenheimer's moral responsibility outweighs the rest. Witnessing his colleagues discussing and denying the credibility of their hard work activates his superego. When asked how they will justify dropping the bomb on people, he says, "We imagine a future and our imaginings horrify us. But they won't fear it until they understand it, and they won't understand it until they've used it. When the world learns the terrible secret at Los Alamos, our work here will ensure a peace mankind has never seen" (01:35:40). Oppenheimer acknowledging the moral burden of their action suggests that his superego is present because he shows awareness of fear and responsibility. However, it simultaneously becomes clear by his speech that Oppenheimer's superego is still overshadowed by his ego, as his initial justification does not crumble like the rest but rather shifts, from the bomb is necessary to end the war, to the bomb is necessary to ensure peace. His continuous belief in

his own righteousness overpowers the superego, which is typically triggered by societal pressure.



Figure 8: Petition against the nuclear bomb

Another similar instance is when Oppenheimer is on his way to the meeting with the secretary of war, Leo Szilard ambushed him with a petition that scientists had made in order to stop the United States government from proceeding with their plan to drop the bomb on Japan (Figure 9). When Oppenheimer suggests that there were other people he could have gone to plead his case, Szilard answers saying, “They’re not you. You are the great salesman of science. You can convince anyone of anything. Even yourself” (01:39:18). The phrase “even yourself” is fundamental, it implies that while he was busy persuading other scientists with the unwavering relevance of their action, he was also shaping his own perception of his role. His superego designed narratives that allowed him to live lighter with his decisions.

Additionally, because Oppenheimer is the director of the project and therefore has more liberties than the rest, he is obliged to perform under immense pressure from the government, military, and his peers. The relentless demand from authority and the unbearable expectation to succeed molded his superego into not only permitting his action but also actively rationalizing them. Rather than having an objective view on the impact of his work, his superego became a tool recalibrated by the military’s demand for results, the government’s insistence to succeed, and his scientific competitive nature to see things through until the end.



Figure 9: Target meeting

A pivotal moment during the film is the target selection meeting (Figure 10) where Dr. Oppenheimer was present alongside other scientists from the Manhattan Project and key military figures. The objective of this meeting is to decide how to proceed in choosing which Japanese city should be targeted to drop the first atomic bomb. The directing choices of putting Oppenheimer, Lawrence, and Fermi on a coach that physically places them lower than all the figures around them might not be coincidental. This positioning suggests that the scientists who created the A-bomb are gradually losing power and control, if they even had any before. Their diminished influence over decision-making is proven during the entire conversation that occurs. When talking about casualties, Oppenheimer does not hesitate to warn everyone, saying, “Don’t underestimate the psychological impact of an atomic explosion... the atomic bomb will be a terrible revelation of divine power” (1:39:58). In his way, he is trying to explain that the use of the bomb should not be a light decision to take. Oppenheimer’s superego is attempting to resurface in this very moment where he sees that the use of his terrible innovation is inevitable and right behind the door. This ultimately leads to his moral concerns resurfacing by exposing the danger of the atomic bomb on people. However, his ego is still in control as he does not fully contradict its use but is merely trying to shake the authoritarian figure’s morals towards it; therefore, his superego might start to wake up, yet not enough to act.

Additionally, Lawrence and Fermi made suggestions to minimize casualties, and in both instances they have been contradicted and their opinion neglected. These instances

further imply the scientists' moral doubts resurfacing along with their realization that their voices are only needed for technical and theoretical matters concerning the bomb, not when it comes to its use. They also show how for militaries, like Groves, military interests override any ethical or moral concerns.

Moreover, at some point, Oppenheimer attempts to mention the internal dissent within the Manhattan Project before being interrupted by Groves. He is clearly in discontent by most of Oppenheimer's words, especially in this instance as he immediately turns the conversation towards him assuring the secretary of war, Mr. Stimson that there has always been some questionable scientists and continues saying, "We need them for now, but as soon as is practical, we should sever any such scientists from the program. Wouldn't you agree, doctor?" (1:42:18). His firm interruption shows his frustration against Oppenheimer's opinion, then his gaze towards him while saying, "Wouldn't you agree, doctor?" and how Oppenheimer stays silent accentuates on the fact that Groves represents the external pressure that reinforces his ego. Oppenheimer could have contradicted Groves or insisted on conveying his view, but as mentioned before, his superego, being the moral concerns, is still put aside while his ego has all power alongside the Id. Thus, when Groves, who serves as a reflection of his rationalization of the A-bomb, reorients his motives, Oppenheimer is again repressing any morality.

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that coming near the end, Oppenheimer is no longer just the scientist who is eager to create the impossible (Id), or a patriot and a savior (ego). Now his conscious is getting stronger and is starting to face the moral weight of his creation. In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud explains that "In suffering under the attacks of the super-ego or perhaps even succumbing to them, the ego is meeting with a fate like that of the Protista which are destroyed by the products of decomposition that they themselves have created" (56). This can be linked to how Oppenheimer's ego is now confronted with his superego; the

very thing he created is about to destroy both the world and his self at the same time. His ego is still trying to justify this action as a military triumph and an unavoidable necessity; however, his superego is forcing its way to lay on the table the consequences, causing a starting feeling of heavy weight on his conscious.

The psychological forces that motivate Oppenheimer throughout the development of the atomic bomb are profoundly complex. His scientific ambition may have been the primary instinct that drove him to undertake this journey, yet his ego and superego are the ones in tension, creating an internal conflict between rationalization and the mounting moral concerns. However, the weight of duty and the pressure of the project's scale overshadow any doubts, allowing him to finalize his innovation. All these elements laid the foundation for the moment of the Trinity Test, marking it a groundbreaking juncture from which the unraveling of his consciousness began to emerge.

2. The Moment of Triumph: A Psychological Elusion

After three years of intensive work on the Manhattan Project, the team at Los Alamos led by Oppenheimer finally comes to witness the embodiment of their achievement. Being the first atomic detonation bomb, the highly anticipated Trinity Test is a success. This triumph turns out to be a psychological elusion, a momentary relief from the overshadowed moral reckoning. At this very moment, Oppenheimer experienced an emotional roller-coaster, feeling stuck between catharsis and terror. His reaction highlights the first signs of repression, as he is facing the extraordinary force of his creation. Oppenheimer's ego crumbled under the surfacing power of the superego and the Trinity Test served as the last hook to his ego's rationalization, delaying but not erasing the imminent moral collapse.

2.1. The Trinity Test: A Moment of Catharsis

The Trinity Test is the climatic event of the movie and a turning point for both history and Oppenheimer. During the hours leading to the detonation, the air was thick with scientific excitement and unspoken apprehension. A mixture of growing tension, pressure, and fear surrounded everyone. Oppenheimer was not immune to that atmosphere, as the director, all the burden falls on him and this pivotal moment heavily impacted his psychological state.



Figure 10: Oppenheimer facing Trinity

The night of July 16, 1945, the stress level at Los Alamos hit its peak. Nolan masters the art of editing, rotating between different shots of multiple characters. The camera follows Oppenheimer silently pacing the room, as he is physically present but mentally distant.

Nature plays the antagonist of the moment “Raining, blowing, lightning” (01:49:36). Before the Trinity Test, the raging storm signifies nature resisting the test as if a bigger force is not in their favor, and also an externalization of the inner chaos everyone is feeling on the site, which unexpectedly ruins their technical preparation, delaying the operation. Moreover, the dark and stormy desert illuminated only by artificial lights evokes a dissonant color palette of icy blues clashing with sudden flashes of warm yellows and oranges, crafting a disruptive environment leading up to the Trinity Test.

Additionally, the instrumental haunting, pulsating score follows the entire sequence, as it starts subtly and then gradually escalates, mirroring the rising anxiety of every person on site. Ludwig Goransson composed this soundtrack incorporating triplet rhythms, hinting at the Trinity Test, a choice that immerses the audience into the emotional atmosphere of the

scene. Meanwhile, the frantic diegetic sound contributes to the climactic buildup. The mix between thunder, wind, metallic clinks, and the rustle of equipment are placed deliberately to feel sharp and invasive that settles a hostile environment. Even the moments of silence are not present as a form of relief but rather as suffocating pauses that allow dread to slowly settle in. All these elements intensify the tense environment that surround Trinity, but also reflect Oppenheimer's psychological turmoil.

When Oppenheimer assures Groves that the storm will break before dawn, the countdown to 5:30 am, the scheduled detonation time, quietly begins. Oppenheimer's state is a maelstrom of conflicting emotions. The entire team is frenetically working to achieve the ultimate goal, yet we can notice how Oppenheimer is physically present but internally distant. His pacing back and forth, constantly glancing at the clock, and often staying silent are evident signs of distress. He is caught between excitement and anticipation, fear of the destructive potential and anxiety about failure. His Id and superego have never been in such conflict, and his ego is trying to balance between his rooted desire for recognition and creation, and the weight of what that exact creation will bring to the world. His ego fights these two forces and the stress surrounding them to escape the growing fear of both success and failure.



Figure 11: Oppenheimer and Groves before Trinity

Amidst the chaos, the only calm moment and semblance of quiet comes in the form of a conversation between the two men (Figure 12). During the scene, the buildup score is dimmed, lingering in the background, allowing their words to take over. Grooves presses

questions on the chances of atmospheric ignition, he remains unconvinced his face tight with skepticism despite Oppenheimer's scientific answers. When Groves says, "If it doesn't go off we are both finished" (1:50:05), he describes the gravity of the situation and what they both have at stake. Oppenheimer reacts satirically, even when explaining that the chain reaction might not stop leading to an apocalyptic event, he spoke with a stillness that felt almost unnatural, a behavior that shows not calmness, but being detached. At this point, the audience is not yet aware that this is the last moment Oppenheimer and Groves stand on the same team. It is a moment that captures the terror behind their confidence and the burden of their positions. A scientist and a military general linked by a single goal they share, nothing in common except for the bomb.

As the clock ticks near to the ultimate test, Oppenheimer's state becomes more complex. His mind becomes a battlefield of negative feelings; however, it at this exact moment, it is not really about the fact that if the bomb succeeds, it would mean he unleashed a destructive weapon. Now his anxiety is linked to whether it will work or not. Pressure is dominating his mind and his superego is failing to withhold the terror of the possibility that the Manhattan Project was a waste of time, resources, money, and beyond everything, trust. Yet, even if quieter, there is a deeper moral fear that is creeping in concerning the true meaning of the succeeding test. His moral consciousness is still trying to take control but his immediate anxiety is the one dominating. Besides, he is almost entirely silent with expressions that borders on paralysis as he is consumed by thoughts that are impossible to voice. One example is when Groves tells him he will head to base camp, Oppenheimer is numb, and it is more heightened when he tells him "Try not to blow up the world" (1:53:36). The weight of this sentences lingers in him, he does not see it as a joke, his mind is already haunted by all the elements and possibilities connected to this one historical moment.

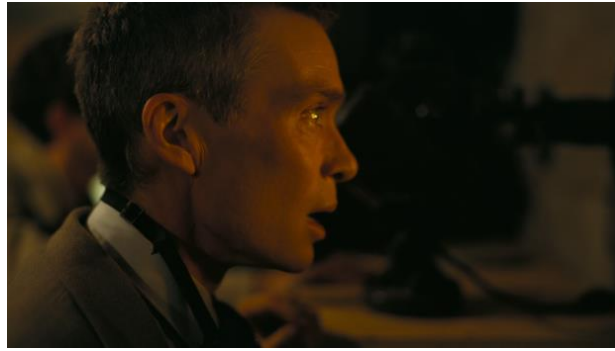


Figure 12: Oppenheimer witnessing the Trinity Test

The T-minus-30 sequence is the ultimate psychological breaking point where the unbearable tension takes effect. Every single person about to witness the detonation is tense, and although surrounded, Oppenheimer is profoundly alone, standing as the *father* of this project with all the responsibility and burden. In those last moments, he is physically frozen, eyes locked on the tower as he murmurs, “These things are hard on your heart” (1:54:53) reflecting his psychological state.

The storm breaks right before dawn as Oppenheimer predicted, in that moment he becomes a spectator of the show, as the bomb takes over everyone’s attention and focus. When the team collectively gathers and joins their mutual places, the final countdown echoes through the speakers. Layer by layer, the soundscape thickens into a steady crescendo that carries the tension forward. As the music hit its peak and the timer gets to one, every single sound vanishes. Ultimately, the explosion finally occurs and Oppenheimer gasps for nearly two minutes (Figure 12). In reality, the scene only lasted a few seconds, although, stretching it this long is Nolan’s cinematic language to intentionally add a dramatic effect that reflects its immense psychological weight. The full scene of the Trinity Test is made in a way that would not only immerse the audience in its intensity, but also its meaning for Oppenheimer.

Complete silence stretches along with the blinding light of the bomb that swallows the desert. Oppenheimer’s heavy breathing and the faint pensive music are heard a few instances later. The explosion reflects through the scientist’s wide unblinking eyes, as the famously

mushroom-shaped cloud rises, then slowly turns into fading dark smoke enveloping the desert. The visual indeed looks like what he predicted, “a terrible revelation of divine power”, (1:40:18) with a void of silence that only leaves Oppenheimer’s heavy breathing, drawing into his internal disorientation. Breaking through the silence, he pronounces his famous words “Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds” (1:57:20) followed by a shock wave with an ear-splitting explosion sound. These words are uttered not in victory; however, in profound psychological collapse. The origin of the quote is a translation from the Bhagavad Gita, a sacred Hindu scripture. That he read as a student and it left lasting impact on him.

In this instance, it all became real. He finally recognizes the inevitable consequences of the nuclear bomb and how he is now a creator and a destroyer. His superego is finally equal to his ego, if not more in control, and he directly faces the irreversible terror he just unleashed on the world. The detonation marks the start of a new age, and for Oppenheimer, the beginning of a lifelong torment. The overwhelming emotions of responsibility, guilt, and fear set the stage for repression through rationality that was once a motive and now acts as a defense mechanism.

2.2. First Signs of Repression

Following the aftermath of the Trinity Test, Oppenheimer’s psyche begins to unravel, not through dramatic outbursts, whereas, in a haunting, subdued manner. The initial moments feel triumphant, years of relentless work have not been in vain, and with his team, they created a revolutionary weapon before anyone could. Yet, it was merely an illusion that was about to disappear. The film shows Oppenheimer in a liminal phase, suspended between the success of the first detonation and the destruction it will bring. The achievement is a passage to the next phase: deploying the nuclear bomb for its intended purpose, ending World War II,

only at an unimaginable cost that he is fully aware of. This represents a crucial rupture in Oppenheimer's psychological landscape. The bomb, once an abstract vision, born of theory and imagination, is now a materialized reality, and witnessing it strips away the so-called justifications for its making and opens his eyes.



Figure 13: Oppenheimer's rejection of agency

After the cheerful loud celebratory scene of the successful Trinity Test, the film cuts to a close-up shot of Oppenheimer, wearing his signature hat and a cigarette in his mouth. The scene gives away to a small but meaningful interaction, the doctor offers some last minute instruction on the bomb while the army is packing it up; however, the military officer answers by saying “With respect, Doctor Oppenheimer. We will take it from here” (2:00:26). The dismissal delivered right after what he considers his greatest achievement marks the first sign over his loss of control. The following moment is a conversation with General Groves, where after Oppenheimer requests to be involved, he informs him that he has no business accompanying him to Washington, reaffirming that his presence is no longer needed (Figure 13). Combined with the lack of details concerning their plans going forward with the bomb, this accumulation of subtle dismissals is hidden under the appearance of administrative formality, in order to send the message that he is not necessary anymore.

During these scenes, Oppenheimer is increasingly sidelined as a side character in his narrative. The audience feels the control slipping from the fingers of the director of Los Alamos. Trying to stay connected to the whereabouts of his creation can be interpreted in various ways. The creator becomes a spectator as he is losing all jurisdiction, and this loss of

control can be deeply unsettling. He births a weapon that crowns his genius, only to be severed from it, left starved of ownership, unable to bask in victory or to halt the destruction it brings. Oppenheimer also feels obligated, a desperate unconscious attempt to lessen the burden of what his creation is capable of, and his ego is trying to cope with the superego's emerging guilt. He might have convinced himself that staying in the loop means he has some moral responsibility, which is easier to live with than being powerless while destruction occurs. The scientist's repression seems to be manifesting through normalization, a defense mechanism to repress the moral weight of the bomb. Freud uses the term ego-instincts to define this behavior. He explains that it "combines the functions of repression with those of self-preservation" (Freud 8). Oppenheimer appears calm while there is a storm brewing within him, while Groves embodies the state's interest in efficiency and silence. His reaction foreshadows how the events will unfold from now on; no more of Oppenheimer's controlled chaos, only a contained and organized response to every wave they hit.



Figure 14: Oppenheimer and Teller

The following interaction serves as a mirror to the earlier scene with Groves. As they stand side by side watching the truck carrying the bomb depart Los Alamos, Edward Teller asks Oppenheimer where he stands regarding their influence on the use of the bomb (Figure 14). "Edward, the fact that we built this bomb does not give us any more right or responsibility to decide how it is used than anyone else" (2:02:02). This response reflects an

act of repression masked as humility, a denial of responsibility he is hiding under a semblance of powerlessness.

On the surface, he seems detached, almost as if trying to absolve himself from responsibility. However, it is a coping mechanism of detachment, a way for Oppenheimer to deal with the unbearable moral implications of what he contributed to create. Furthermore, it can be interpreted as an ego defense. Denying responsibility while previously seeking influence and control, shows a tension between his public position and his private desires. In various instances, Oppenheimer shows inner hypocrisy that highlights the psychological fragmentation he experiences. His ego feels emasculated and redirects to detachment and humility to rationalize being excluded.

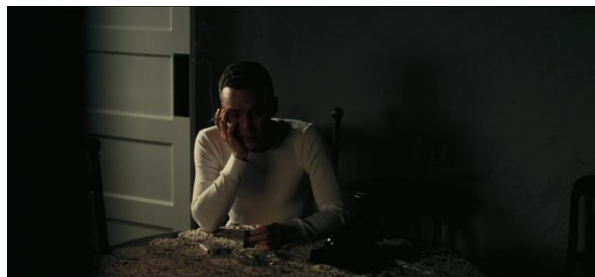


Figure 15: Oppenheimer waiting to hear news about the bomb

Now that Los Alamos has completed its ultimate project, the U.S government can finally benefit. Little Boy and Fat Man are taken to be dropped on the chosen locations in Japan, an action that feels deeply heavy on Oppenheimer's conscious.

After being rejected from any further involvement even though all credits for the creation of the atomic bomb are his, Oppenheimer is in a state of numbness. He has in his possession only one crucial information; the bombing will occur on the 6th of August 1945. In fact, the night of the 5th, we see in the film Oppenheimer sitting alone at a table, a cigarette in his hand and the phone right near him (Figure 15). When Kitty walks in, he says, "I thought they would call" to which she answers, "It's only the 5th", though he corrects her saying, "In Japan, it's the 6th" (2:02:50). All signs show a psychological collapse, everything

is out of his control, the thing that he is not used to after being the director of this project. Yet he somewhat still believed they would at least call to keep him informed. This leaves him in a state of despair when realizing that he is no longer needed; hence, he is displaced and unimportant. His calmness does not reflect peace; it is a defense mechanism he uses unconsciously. His eagerness to hear about the bombing is not just related to power and recognition; he is waiting for a call that will announce death and destruction, merely because of the repressed guilt that is surfacing even before anything happens. The detail of mentioning that the 6th is already there in Japan showcases how he is engulfed in the emotional aftermath of an event yet to unfold.



Figure 16: Oppenheimer's reaction to Hiroshima

The most morally charged moment of the entire film and likely of Oppenheimer's life is the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Nevertheless, unlike expectations, it is not met with triumph or celebration, rather an overwhelming reckoning with guilt. August 6th might be Oppenheimer's darkest milestone, as he is anticipating a call that would confirm the mass destruction his genius caused. Cillian Murphy (Oppenheimer) delivers a precise and remarkable emotional performance (Figure 16). He manages to channel an overwhelming spectrum of feelings between anticipation, stress, dread, guilt, and a haunting sense of finality. He is pacing the room; his body language is a testament of anxiety, while repeatedly trying to reach Groves or anyone on this matter that can inform him of anything possible. In this instance, Oppenheimer, despite trying to suppress it, is mainly thinking about the extent of

the bomb's damage. It is the real cause behind his uneasiness, not just the need to confirm whether his creation worked.

At some point, Charlotte (secretary) shouts, "Truman's on the radio" (2:03:22), which instantly captivates Oppenheimer's attention. On the other side we hear the President finally ending the doctor's long nerve-wrecking period of anticipation as he announces that America dropped a bomb on Hiroshima and "destroyed its usefulness to the enemy", referring to the fact that it was a military base. This brief speech marks the denouement of Oppenheimer's psyche. Murphy does not just act; he inhabits the weight of history itself. With eyes full of tears yet clearly fighting the urge to show any negative emotion, Oppenheimer is in a state of psychological turmoil. He is stuck between guilt and pride, relief and dread, satisfaction and horror; however, during these first moments, his superego takes total control, feeling shattered and crushed. The rationalization of his creation as a necessity does not seem to be strong enough anymore to protect him from any moral weight; therefore, he succumbs to the consequences of what he unleashed.

Oppenheimer finally receives that "expected" call with Groves after the public announcement. This exclusion symbolizes again how he is sidelined and not needed or wanted, and losing control weighs heavily on his ego. It could also be seen as a subtle foreshadowing of the betrayal and humiliation he will later face during the security hearing. Groves' comment, "Apparently it went with a tremendous bang" (2:04:11) is a jarringly casual, almost insensitive line. The annihilation of an entire city seems to create a contrast reaction for these two men; as a militant, Groves sees this as a triumphant, successful mission. While Oppenheimer feels the weight of destruction. It highlights the rift between the military's perception of the bomb as a mere tool, and the scientist's growing moral crisis. Oppenheimer then says, "Well, everyone here is feeling reasonably good about it." This

vague and diplomatic response shows how he is unable to comprehend or accept what he truly feels; it hides more than it reveals as he suppresses a storm of guilt.

By covering the events leading up to the Trinity Test and the way they unfold in the aftermath of the first atomic bomb detonation in history, we observe Oppenheimer gradually adapt to the growing tension by completely repressing and numbing his feelings, which is an evident defense mechanism. He is displaying a false pretense of calmness in order to save face and canalize his stress. When Oppenheimer is dismissed and left in the dark, we witness him gradually get distressed and consumed by the anticipation leading up to the bomb's detonation. However, it is noticeable how he still manages to keep his psyche's deterioration under wraps and never really abandons his state of repression. In the following part, the examination will focus on the scientist's state after the bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima and how political schemes and his self-destructive drive will lead to his downfall.

Section Two: Moral Reckoning and Psychological Collapse

While the Japanese are mourning the hundreds of thousands of people who died from either the immediate detonation or fatal injuries, the Americans are busy celebrating their country's groundbreaking creation. Simultaneously, Oppenheimer's nickname *the father of the atomic bomb* echoes around the world. As the dust settles after the bombing, a deep sense of moral consequences settles in tandem in Oppenheimer's consciousness, replacing his scientific ambition. This section delves into Oppenheimer's psychological state after the bomb, and how he grapples with the consequences of the weapon of mass destruction he created as he navigates this new world he helped shape. He is completely losing control, and all he suppressed is now appearing stronger than ever. His guilt will lead him to speak his mind and take political stands that will cost him his career and reputation. Through the years

and events, Oppenheimer does not stray away from his unhealthy defense mechanism as he switches repression with self-destruction. This fall from grace is ultimately framed by the final moment of the film, where our tragic hero meets head-on with the profound burden of his creation.

1. Post-Hiroshima and Nagasaki: The Repression of Guilt

From the moment the United States bombed Japan leading to mass destruction and death, Oppenheimer's psychological state has been in complete turmoil. He is now confronting the devastating aftermath of his creation that heavily affects him. The success of the atomic bomb comes at a moral cost, marking a period of internal disintegration and emotional dissonance. Freud's concept of repression examines the mind's attempt to contain the weight of guilt.

Here the mechanism by which the sense of guilt remains unconscious is easy to discover. The hysterical ego fends off a distressing perception with which the criticisms of its super-ego threaten it, in the same way in which it is in the habit of fending off an unendurable object-cathexis—by an act of repression. It is the ego, therefore, that is responsible for the sense of guilt remaining unconscious. We know that as a rule the ego carries out repressions in the service and at the behest of its super-ego; (Freud 51)

In our analysis, this applies to Oppenheimer desperately trying to protect his conscious by repressing his consuming guilt. His ego is fighting the moral collapse that followed the bombing of Hiroshima caused by the superego.



Figure 17: Oppenheimer's panic attack during his speech.

Following the public announcement, Oppenheimer goes to deliver a speech to his colleagues who contributed to the making of the A-bomb. The second he enters the auditorium, his focus is mainly on the crowd stomping their feet, a form of cheering in unison. This showcases Oppenheimer's overwhelming anxiety from the beginning. The room is filled with people celebrating this accomplishment, yet many of them are hiding their collapse behind a mask.

Oppenheimer manages to put on a smile that fades almost instinctively. During his attempt to give a patriotic speech, his words are fractured and hesitant. "The world will remember this day. It's too soon to... It's too soon to determine what the results of the bombing are. But I'm sure the Japanese didn't like it" (2:06:33), words he delivers with a constantly drifting gaze as he hears clear rumbling in his ears. Christopher Nolan puts the audience inside Oppenheimer's head, experiencing everything with him. The use of a close-up is essential in this scene, and we notice a trembling effect around the protagonist's head that highlights the overwhelming anxiety and the manifestation of inner collapse (Figure 17). Although the crowd is loudly cheering, Oppenheimer is suddenly surrounded by a mortifying silence followed by a sudden scream. He tries again with an evident look of discontent and utters, "I just wish we had it in time to use it against the Germans." His delivery feels strained, as though every word is dragged against his will. It is almost mechanical, like a person reciting without context just what is expected of them.



Figure 18: Oppenheimer's Hallucinations

Oppenheimer's psyche has never been this conflicted; his ego and superego are on a battlefield confronting each other. He is torn between the deeply haunting consequences of his creation and the public image he is expected to give. Even his facial expressions conflict with a forced smile of enthusiasm and tormented eyes. At this point, the silence is still going, and a blinding light submerges the hall. It only goes brighter as he sees a woman smiling while her flesh rips (Figure 18), ashes excessively falling from the ceiling like heavy snow (Figure 18), and suddenly everyone disappears, and the place is empty (Figure 19). The scene mirrors the event of Hiroshima, his mind is tormented, haunted by the terror he inflicted. His superego takes control and resurfaces all the suppressed guilt. He is traumatized by a moment he did not experience, yet his mind constructs through hallucinations.

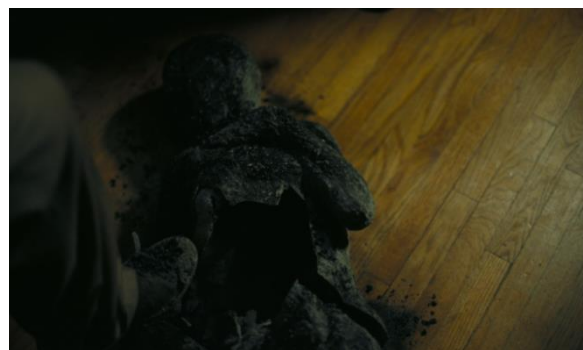
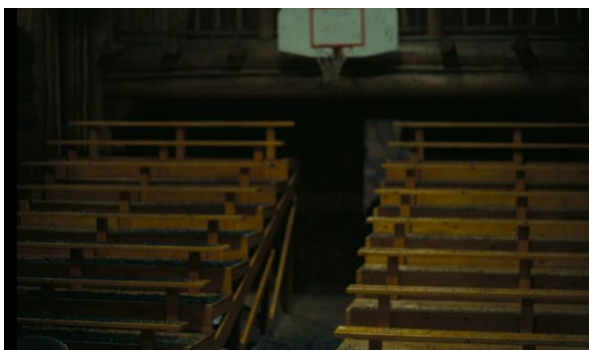


Figure 19: Oppenheimer's hallucinations

Suddenly, Oppenheimer is in the middle of the crowd walking out. This time lapse is a psychological break that might have resulted from a panic attack or an emotional dissonance. It is as if he collapses, becomes completely disconnected, unable to comprehend

what he is going through. He is present but mentally disoriented, he hears in the background screams of agony, he looks up and a young woman is laughing, he looks down and sees his foot inside a charred corpse (Figure 19), and then he turns and the young woman is now sobbing, a couple is kissing under the bleaches, yet another second another one is sobbing. All these signs are connected to a psychological collapse. Oppenheimer's conscious is overloaded with the painful realization of the damage he created, and it reflects through intrusive visions. His mind proved with time to work in a strange, fascinating way, but also how complex and conflicted it often is. Instead of celebrating which is the expected reaction if he had believed in all his previous justifications for making the bomb and using it, he is having a mental breakdown and is haunted by the aftermath of the bomb.



Figure 20: Oppenheimer at the white house

Post-Hiroshima and Nagasaki is a period that shows a significant shift in Oppenheimer's psyche. His reaction to the events is proof of his ego's loss of control, as his superego is now causing a moral reckoning. He is suffering from post-traumatic stress, and he is dissociating from the reality of this new age. Right after the crowd cheering scene, the film jumps straight to a close-up shot of Oppenheimer on the Time's magazine with the issue *Father of the Atomic Bomb* (Figure 20). He still seems to be mentally withdrawn and dissociated from the world surrounding him (Figure 20), and like in the previous scene, initiating physical contact brings him back. He is somewhere lost in his thoughts, conflicted as he faces his actions.



Figure 21: Oppenheimer meets President Truman

Oppenheimer is in the White House, ready to meet President Truman (Figure 21). Once there, the conversation between the two does not happen as expected. Some details are crucial to uncover Oppenheimer's psychological state regarding this meeting and the use of the bomb in general. When Truman mentions how he helped to save a lot of American lives and recalls the events of Hiroshima, Oppenheimer immediacy corrects him and says, "and Nagasaki" (2:09:51) emphasizing how he is facing the full extent of the destruction of the A-bomb and bearing its weight without neglecting or dismissing the scope of the bombing contrary to Truman. The ultimate justification of the bomb was to end the war and save people, yet now Oppenheimer does not cheer that accomplishment because of the lives that had to be sacrificed.

The he President continues saying, "Your inventions let us bring our boys home" another time where Oppenheimer corrects him by adding, "It was hardly my invention." Freud describes this as a case of disavowal, a term he first introduced in his essay "Fetishism" (1927), explaining it as a defense mechanism where a person refuses to accept reality or responsibility. Before the bombing, Oppenheimer craved recognition and was eager to fulfill his scientific desires; therefore, a moment like this one would have been a memorable life accomplishment. Yet after the bombings, the burden weighs heavier than expected; thus, rejecting the reward for leadership is a desperate attempt to alleviate some guilt. Being called a hero was once all he desired, while now it feels revolting.

The conversation gets even tenser with every interaction, between addressing his concerns with the Soviets, asking for international cooperation, and even suggests giving back Los Alamos to the Indians now that the project is over, Truman looks discontented and unhappy with Oppenheimer's opinions, he either ignores or mocks them. Oppenheimer sees that he is sidelined and unwanted, which facilitates addressing his thoughts openly, for having nothing to lose. The government does not need him anymore; he is leaving Los Alamos, and he is in a psychological collapse from all the guilt he feels. What better moment for him to be opinionated; however, it marks the beginning of the government's opposition towards him.

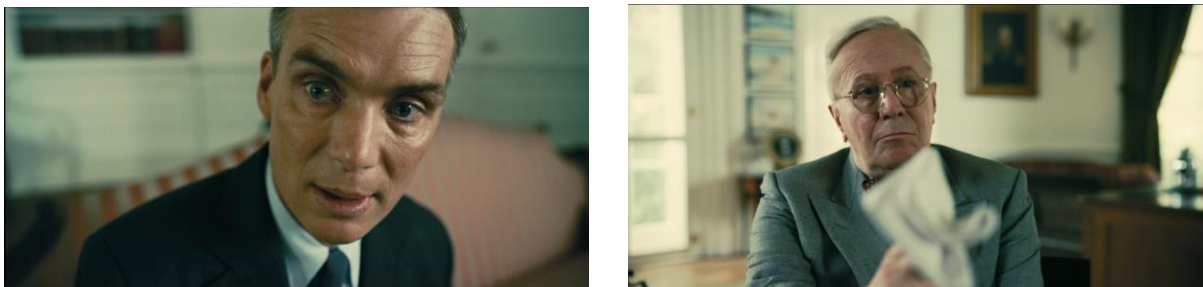


Figure 22: Truman dismissing Oppenheimer's guilt

Eventually, Oppenheimer utters his infamous statement with glassy eyes, "Mr. President, I feel that I have blood on my hands" (2:11:23) (Figure 22). This is the first time he expresses his reckoning and speaks of the guilt that torments him. He is struggling to live with the aftermath of his invention, and he blames himself for the chaos it inflicted. His conscious is suffering as everything resurfaces. Unfortunately, Truman's response only makes things worse stating, "You think anyone in Hiroshima or Nagasaki gives a shit who built the bomb? They care who dropped it. I did. Hiroshima isn't about you" (Figure 22). With this statement, the President dismisses Oppenheimer's distress, and being a powerful authoritative figure amplifies the impact it has on him. Oppenheimer's psychological crisis is being ignored; he is seeking someone to whom he could confess and acknowledge his guilt, but Truman denies him this privilege, stripping him of significance in the moral narrative he

is trying to claim. It is devastating for his psyche, he is finally asserting himself, expressing his feelings and opinion, yet he is not heard and is deprived of taking a step into healing.

Freud explains in *Civilization and its Discontent* (1930) “The super-ego torments the sinful ego with the same feeling of anxiety and is on the watch for opportunities of getting it punished by the external world” (125). Oppenheimer’s ego is crumbled under the superego’s weight, the annihilation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki destroyed the well-constructed wall he was hiding behind, and now he is craving a relief from his internal torment. Therefore, speaking his guilt out loud is a big accomplishment for a man like him, though Truman refuses to contribute to this process. The U.S President is composed and cheerful, the bomb is a justified political and military tool for him, and he fully believes in the national interest at any cost. This contrasts with Oppenheimer, who has the same beliefs with the difference of having a moral conscious. It is the usual tragic story behind scientists and the government; they are used until no longer needed, dismissing moral implications in favor of power, then cast aside, left to carry the consequences of their creation.

Right after this interaction, Oppenheimer is escorted out by the Secretary of War and the audience witnesses an emotional rapture between the two characters. Truman gives an offhand comment saying “Don’t let that crybaby back in here.” He is not just dismissing Oppenheimer; he is belittling his guilt and emotional vulnerability, as if he is mocking him. The line underscores Truman’s incapacity to engage with the ethical implication of his actions. He is a detached political figure who sees guilt as a weakness not a virtue, leaving Oppenheimer isolated with no one to hear his confession resulting for him to be more tormented.

From now on, Oppenheimer understood that addressing his guilt and speaking of remorse would not lead anywhere, it is not the way that would heal him or ease his conscious,

and so he decides to fully embrace the image of the father of the atomic bomb. It gives him the voice and protection he needs to address his thoughts without restrictions. He draws attention to him, and a man as historically significant having progressive ideals was not really appreciated by all during that time. His enemies grew, and he became a target to the government as he is opposing many of their actions, especially the most problematic being against the hydrogen bomb. However, Oppenheimer did not really care about the growing danger behind him, which can be interpreted as either an honorable initiative to protect the world from further chaos, or a desperate pursuit to get punished and relief his trauma, what would Freud call the death drive.



Figure 23: Oppenheimer averts from looking at pictures of human casualties

Before officially leaving Los Alamos, Oppenheimer attends a conference alongside other scientists, speaking of the aftermath of the bombings. Where various pictures of the damages the weapon had on the population is shown. The audience does not see the horrifying images in front of Oppenheimer's eyes, but his facial expression does not fail to capture their devastating impact. He looks down when faced with images of people burned (Figure 23), showing a profound internal rapture. The gradual close-up intensifies the emotional focus on him, and it immerses the audience into understanding his turmoil and isolation. He is already haunted by the events, hallucinating about their consequences, yet being faced by real pictures dives him into a profound devastation.

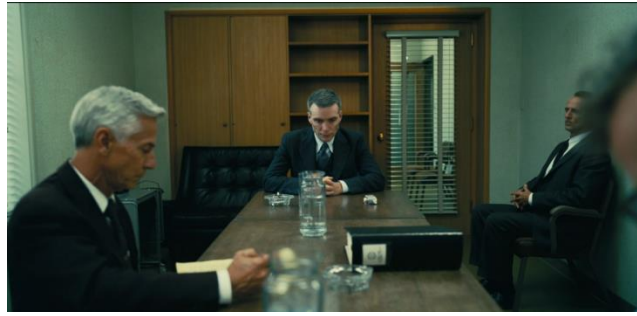


Figure 24: Oppenheimer's security hearing

Another significant scene that emphasizes Oppenheimer's psychological state post-Hiroshima and Nagasaki is by the end of his security hearing (Figure 24). Roger Robb, a U.S. attorney and prosecutor, confronts Oppenheimer about his moral qualms. Oppenheimer manages to keep his calm during the hearing; however, in this specific conversation, he begins to visibly unravel. He is hesitant, stammering, and struggles to word his thoughts, echoing the overwhelming anxiety Robb's questions and statements cause. Gradually, their conversation takes a full-blown psychological rapture that unveils his thoughts in the worst ways possible.

Robb forces his way through Oppenheimer's mind to access his true convictions and expose him in front of the council. His technique is to confront him in a relentless tone, pressing him to break and utter exactly what he is looking for. The content of the discussion is around the moral qualms concerning the H-bomb but also the nuclear bomb. Oppenheimer starts to understand that the attorney is playing with his nerves when he tackles his responsibility with the bombing of Japan. This weakens his psychological state and makes him vulnerable, especially added with his accusatory tone. He begins to hear the sound of feet stamping due to a suppressed trauma resurfacing. Added to the unsettling score that was present from the beginning of the final act; together they settle a nervous atmosphere that depicts Oppenheimer's current state.

Years have passed since the bombings, yet the guilt is not gone. It is only suppressed and expressed differently, and this moment unravels it. Robb reminds him of the horrifying human cost in detail through numerous questions. This causes the stamping in his ears to get faster and louder while the camera slowly zooms on him. The psychological pressure Robb inflicts on Oppenheimer is becoming less bearable with every word. When asked on moral scruples about the two hundred and twenty thousand dead, he admits saying, “Terrible ones” (2:44:40). Although Robb’s objective is not to make Oppenheimer say he feels guilty, but rather to show that he is unstable, contradictory, and completely discredit him. Therefore, he continues, saying, “Yet you testified in here that the bombing of Hiroshima was very successful.” It is a direct attack and a trap to corner Oppenheimer; he faces him with his own contradiction of how he claims to be conscious; however, his actions and words say otherwise. It is clear that Robb wants to show all members present that he is unreliable and unstable, and that he is too conflicted and emotionally unstable to be trusted as a public figure.



Figure 25: Oppenheimer’s distress during the security hearing

Robb questions Oppenheimer’s convictions, why would he oppose dropping a thermonuclear bomb on Japan because of moral scruples, yet he did not oppose the nuclear bomb on Hiroshima because of moral scruples. He is trying to prove that Oppenheimer is hypocritical and incoherent, that his actions and beliefs are inconsistent. Oppenheimer explains that “I set forth arguments against dropping it. But I did not endorse them” (Figure 25). Likewise, the attorney reveals another paradox, laughing as he questions why he would hardly work for three years building the bomb, only to then argue against its use.

He even goes further, still in a mocking tone, that Oppenheimer supported the bombing of Japan. This is a direct attack against his consciousness, and the word “support” is the trigger point that magnifies Oppenheimer’s anxiety attack. He tries to explain that he was not in charge of decision-making and that he was only doing what was expected and demanded of him. However, Robb counterattacks by saying, “Then you would have built the H-bomb too, wouldn’t you?” additionally, he mentions the GAC, the General Advisory Committee of the United States Atomic Energy Commission, and report he co-authored that advocates against the building of the Super. He is cornering Oppenheimer, facing him with contradictions in his moral and political positions in order to undermine his credibility. Not only that, but he is not playing fair; he bombards Oppenheimer with fast-paced, loaded questions to destabilize and expose him.



Figure 26: Oppenheimer’s visual distortion during moral confrontation

The tension is at its highest, and Oppenheimer is experiencing a recurrent episode of traumatic repression breaking through the conscious mind. The stamping intensifies, a blinding light submerges the place, the distorted sound magnifies, and a thunder hits above Robb (Figure 26). This is the return of the repressed, which according to Freud, “The repressed is only cut off sharply from the ego by the resistance of repression;” (24) the repressed feelings are kept away from the conscious ego, regardless of whether they are through the ego’s active resistance. Through the years, Oppenheimer tried to suppress the guilt, utilizing a defense mechanism to seek punishment. Yet, strong forces are easily triggered and cannot be held back eternally.

Once again, just like during the speech he gave at Los Alamos after the public announcement of Hiroshima's bombing, Oppenheimer is undergoing a panic attack. The hallucinations are signs of deep psychological tensions; he is overwhelmed, anxious, burdened, and disoriented. He even has flashbacks of previous hallucinations during the GAC council, imagining bombs dropped all over the world, and visions of when he learned about the death of his previous lover Jean Tatlock, all connected to a haunting sense of guilt. Oppenheimer is stammering, unable to have clear thoughts, let alone pronounce them.

Every single thread that is holding him composed breaks when Robb asks, "And wouldn't the Russians do anything to increase their strength?" as his last move, to which Oppenheimer concedes and answers, "If we did it, they would have to do it. Our effort would only fuel their efforts, just as it had with the atomic bomb." In doing so, he gave Robb exactly what he was looking to prove "No moral scruples in 1945, plenty in 1949." He wanted to prove that Oppenheimer is not acting out of concern for humanity or moral principle. Instead, he shows that it is a personal conflict where he is merely trying to feel important, tragic, and redeem himself like a martyr. He dismisses his guilt, portraying him as self-centered and emotionally unstable, implying that his moral concerns are not from ethical convictions, rather a late attempt to appear noble. As if he knew all along about consequences, yet expressing remorse only when it served his narrative.

From a psychoanalytic point of view, Robb's attack destabilizes the fragile balance between Oppenheimer's ego and superego, forcing him to confront the dissonance between his past justifications and his present guilt. Robb's tense interrogation exposes his repressed remorse, revealing a man whose guilt is both real and entangled with an unconscious need for punishment and redemption. In the end, Oppenheimer is asked about the exact moment his moral convictions develop concerning the H-bomb; he replies, "When it became clear to me

that we would tend to use any weapon we had.” This is an important revelation; he recognizes the unconscious compulsions of human beings toward destruction, perhaps even his own, contrasting with Robb’s assumptions. While Oppenheimer’s moral awakening appears genuine and rooted in the understanding of humanity’s ruthless thirst for power, the painful truth cannot be denied that he is seeking judgment to regain moral agency.

2. The Death Drive: Self-Destruction and Political Downfall

Only the strongest shoulders can carry the weight of the horrors the American government inflicted on Nagasaki and Hiroshima, and Oppenheimer’s did not appear capable to live up to the task. As the years flew by, the confident man who once ruled over Los Alamos became a shallow shell of himself. It seemed that time was not kind to his fragile guilt-ridden mind. In 1954, the former director is subjected to a private security hearing orchestrated by Lewis Strauss. The hearing, initially intended to determine whether his security clearance gets renewed, ultimately becomes Oppenheimer’s personal trial, in which his life’s work, personal relationships, political convictions, and sense of patriotism are all called into question. In the face of this overwhelming scrutiny, his defense mechanism begins to crumble as he slowly loses his self-preservation to a deep-seated psychic compulsion to be undone.

In order to, adequately frame Oppenheimer’s behavior as a form of self-sabotage, Freud’s theory of the death drive characterized by self-destruction will help understand Oppenheimer’s willingness to submit to political humiliation and psychological torment. In hopes of understanding why, rather than fighting back and resisting against the forces to which he devoted himself, the scientist would rather be a willing participant and witness his own downfall.

Oppenheimer's trial did not occur in an ostentatious court but rather in a faraway room hidden from the cameras. Despite the lack of media exposition, it was nonetheless a public humiliation as his former colleagues took the stand against him one by one. The scientist's isolation materializes and solidifies; we witness the man once worshiped by the scientific community and skilled in navigating political machinery now stranded by both.



Figure 27: Teller's testimony

The testimony of Edward Teller was one of the most jarring moments of the hearing. Teller was part of the inner scientific circle in Los Alamos (Figure 27). However, his ambition and desire to build a hydrogen bomb were obvious from the beginning. Therefore, it is not surprising that he cultivated a certain animosity towards Oppenheimer, who has publicly expressed his opinions against the H-bomb. During the hearing, when asked if he believed that Oppenheimer was a security risk, he says,

In a great number of cases I have seen Doctor Oppenheimer act in a way which for me was exceedingly hard to understand. I thoroughly disagreed with him in numerous issues, and his actions, frankly, appeared to me confused and complicated. To this extent, I feel that I would like to see the vital interests of this country in hands which I understand better and therefore trust more. (2:34:57)

After witnessing Teller's testimony against him and thus participate in his demise, Oppenheimer still shakes his hand as he leaves the room (Figure 27), a gesture that symbolizes Oppenheimer's willingness to self-destruction, reinforcing the logic of Freud's

death drive. Furthermore, Teller's account and actions were not just damaging in context; they display Oppenheimer's growing isolation and political alienation as his former allies quietly withdrew from his cause.



Figure 28: Lawrence withdraws

The next betrayal comes from Ernest Lawrence, the experimental scientist who Oppenheimer personally knew before their involvement in the Manhattan Project (Figure 28). Although Lawrence will not grace them with his presence, faking an illness, he will still send a written statement. His refusal to testify in favor of his lifelong friend and the half-hearted words are portrayed as betrayal.

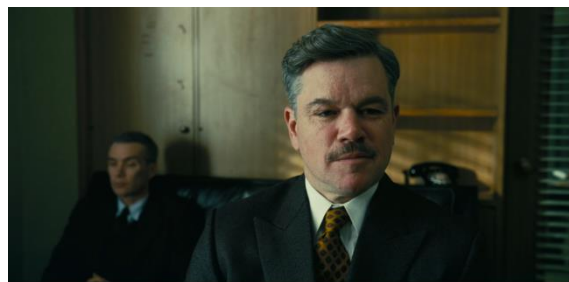


Figure 29: Grooves' testimony

Proceeding comes General Grooves, and unlike Edward Teller's statement, his attestation adapts a more pragmatic stance (Figure 29). While his words are not an outright defense in favor of Oppenheimer, he avoids saying something that could condemn his former colleague. His words, though not sympathetic, linger between duty and personal regard. When asked if he would clear Oppenheimer today after knowing all about his past communist affiliation and other questionable behavior, he states, "Under my interpretation of the Atomic

Energy Act, which did not exist when I hired Doctor Oppenheimer in 1942... I would not clear Doctor Oppenheimer today if I were a member of the commission” (2:36:00). When asked if he is questioning Oppenheimer’s loyalty to the United States, he clarifies his intentions with “By no means. I hope I didn’t lead anybody to think otherwise for an instant” (2:36:42). As mentioned earlier, he does not speak against him. However, His testimony is portrayed as damning. Since the lawyer twists his words to harm Oppenheimer’s credibility. With that, Christopher Nolan emphasizes how even a neutral testimony can be weaponized.

From a Freudian perspective, the betrayal that Oppenheimer experiences can be read as an assault against the ego. Therefore, by undermining its anchor it shatters the doctor’s feeling of order and belonging. The hearing is a battlefield where individuals who beforehand legitimized his existence progressively dismantle his ego, not only by convicting him, but also from the explicit abandonment. This left a fissure within his inner self. Nolan interprets the hearing as a feeling of psychological disintegration, where his alienation is not only external but also internalized at a profound level.

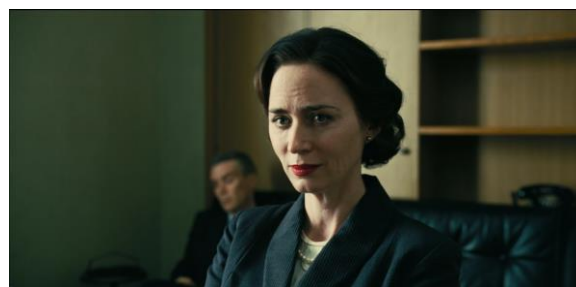


Figure 30: Kitty’s testimony

During the days-long security hearing, one voice that stood out is kitty Oppenheimer. Unlike the others, she stood by, supported, and defended her husband during her testimony (Figure 30). However, she still challenged him in the privacy of their home. Kitty urged him to fight harder and expressed multiple times her frustration and disagreement with his

behavior, “you need to stop playing the martyr” (2:35:47) “it’s always been Strauss and you know it. Why won’t you fight him?” (2:20:46). during these moments, she emerges as the embodiment of resistance to humiliation, someone who does not want to tolerate and accept the shaming of her husband. Yet he stays silent through it all; he does neither resist nor react. This contradiction between her urgency and his retreat reveals a fracture in his psyche, one that indicates not only his loss of will to fight but also a deeper compulsion toward punishment.

In this dynamic, Kitty becomes the voice of the reality principle. A concept from Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory, it is the way the ego operates in trying to balance the far-fetched or impulsive desire of the Id. “...the ego seeks to bring the influence of the external world to bear upon the id and its tendencies, and endeavors to substitute the reality principle for the pleasure principle which reigns unrestrictedly in the id” (25). In Oppenheimer’s case, while his wife pushes him to act according to rational self-preservation, he refuses, suggesting that the ego is overwhelmed and the death drive, which is fueled by guilt, overrides rational decisions or reactions.



Figure 31: Borden testimony

The moment Oppenheimer and his lawyer understood that his case was a lost battle happened way before the board even announced the verdict. That reckoning occurs when William L. Borden, a lawyer who served in the United States Congress Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, sits in the chair to testify against the scientist (Figure 31). Unknown to the

defense is the crucial information that Borden is handpicked by Lewis Strauss, the same man who orchestrated this entire charade, with the goal of writing up a letter of conclusions based on a classified FBI file. The content of the letter states different reasons why, according to him, Oppenheimer is an undercover agent of the Soviet Union.

As the scientist hears the written claims, the earth-shattering realization settles in his mind. He covers his face with his hand, incapable of facing anyone's stare in the room (Figure 31). Oppenheimer quietly whispers to his lawyer, "Is anyone ever going to tell the truth about what's happening here?" (2:32:00) as the last plea, that does not only indicates external frustration but also an ultimate internal fragmentation. His reality collapses, leading to a complete dismantling of mental cohesion.

Ultimately, the disintegration of Oppenheimer's ego is a result of the culminating psychic conflicts caused by external forces and the incapacity of the ego to maintain its mediating function between the Id, which consists of the unconscious drive towards self-destruction and veering him in the direction of mental collapse by manifesting a state of passive behavior. In addition, the demands of the superego push him to act in the name of morality, which consists of his guilt over the bomb's consequences. Naturally, the ego crumbles under this equation, unable to bridge between punishment and destructive impulse. This reflects the workings of the death drive itself; his psyche unravels as he willingly seeks punishment to access the state of pre-consciousness he is incapable of attaining. The one who was once a national hero is now a man haunted by guilt, stripped of agency, and whose identity is completely dismantled.

In summary, the dynamic interplay between the Id, the ego, and the superego is highlighted by Oppenheimer's psychological descent during the security hearing. Additionally, how the ego responds to external challenges, and how Oppenheimer's case

perfectly fits Freud's death drive theory. The following and final part will entail the last of Oppenheimer's journey, where he will face the consequences of his invention after the trial's verdict and a final confrontation. This shift in focus will allow us to examine the moral reckoning that involves being both the creator of the bomb and the destroyer of the world.

3. The Burden of the Creator

As the final credits are about to roll in on the film, the topic of discussion turns from the political discourse to the deeply personal field of internal reckoning. What remains of the young and ambitious man who once strived for greatness, is a man crumbling under the weight of his creation. Our protagonist is confronted with the magnitude of his innovation and the irreversible consequences he released on the world. The final part of the movie is a contemplation of guilt, legacy, and a fantasy for redemption. The father of the atomic bomb is no longer fighting institutions or trying to assert his opinions on the narrative; instead, he does not shy away from being struck by the consequences of his action, with no other personal agenda aside from self-destruction. Our final analysis will focus on Oppenheimer's psychological breakdown, including his desire for punishment, the moment he receives the verdict that determines his fate, and ultimately, a scene in the film with Einstein that haunts the narrative.



Figure 32: Einstein confronts Oppenheimer

One of the film's most emotionally honest scenes is lost in the shuffle of the third and final act of the movie, a brief and simple one-on-one conversation between Einstein and Oppenheimer that takes place after nightfall, away from the formalities (Figure 32). The two scientists, known to not always see eye to eye, share a vulnerable moment where Einstein tells Oppenheimer that he also was used and discarded by his country and that it was fine to leave it all behind and not grapple with his undying sense of loyalty. Hearing these words from someone Oppenheimer looks up to and has a deep respect for, in the midst of a trial where other scientists actively contribute to his professional and political burial means a lot. Simultaneously as the first note of the final soundtrack is heard, he bursts the words "Damn it, I happen to love this country." This confession is simple yet carries heavy implications. His admission proves that he still clings to his national identity, one he cannot seem to renounce, even though often not reciprocated.

Oppenheimer receives the verdict of the trial while seated in the same chair his friends, colleagues, collaborators, and even his wife testified, whether in his defense or against him. Though the board unanimously agrees that Oppenheimer is a loyal United States citizen, they nonetheless denied the renewal of his security clearance. Through it all, our protagonist remains statuesque, silent, and unmoving, the physical embodiment of submission and resignation. The only moment of speech he allows himself is to utter a single sentence, "don't put in the sheets" (2:48:46), a secret code destined for his wife. Nolan deliberately chose this phrase as a stark echo of an earlier moment: right after the Trinity Test, Oppenheimer had called Kitty to inform her of their success. Surrounded by the cheering at Los Alamos, he used the cryptic words "put in the sheets." Once a code for triumph, now in reverse marks his undoing. The symbolic parallel between these two scenes, on the one hand loud cheering scientific glory, on the other muted political downfall, summarizes the tragic arc of a man who rose to fame as a creator, now buried under the ruins of said creation. This moment is the

crystallization of Oppenheimer's ego disintegration. In this scene, the scientist no longer mediates between his desires and external reality because the trial reduces him to an object with no sense of the self. We can deduce by his stillness, lack of response, and the absence of any rhetorical defense regarding the verdict a psychic withdrawal. This surrender mirrors a final stage in his collapse. He ceased to negotiate with his reality, choosing to retreat into a place where guilt and isolation have completely overridden the ego's function.

As the film approaches its end, the audience is not taken to the chronological aftermath of the verdict; instead, they are led back to an earlier private moment shared between Oppenheimer and Einstein. In a quiet, isolated setting surrounded by nature and water, years before the security hearing trial, the scene is familiar, since we had a glimpse of it before from Lewis Strauss's point of view, drowned in the throes of political scheming and misinformation. Now, it resurfaces with clarity and finality. Oppenheimer approaches Einstein near the pond, and what follows is not a conversation between two geniuses but a transfer of weight and consequences and a true monumental moment in history.

With a heavy voice and wisdom that can only be acquired through experience, Einstein delivers a speech: "Now it's your turn to deal with the consequences of your achievements. And one day, when they've punished you enough, they'll serve salmon and potato salad. Make speeches, give you a medal. Pat you on the back and tell you all is forgiven. Just remember, it won't be for you. It'll be for them." (2:51:56) as he says the words, images are shown of the Enrico Fermi ceremony where Oppenheimer appears old and gray, hinting that the events take place years after the trial. This statement resonates with so much of Oppenheimer's life; it becomes the moral and emotional reckoning that he can no longer avoid, the culmination of all that had preceded the Trinity Test, the bombings in Japan,

and the hearing with the betrayal and silence that it entails. Einstein does not offer comfort but rather the blunt truth.

Through a psychoanalytical lens, this scene marks an additional and final collapse of Oppenheimer's ego. The moment when his distorted self can no longer resist against the return of the repressed, as the guilt and responsibility force their way back into consciousness, everything he had intended to keep buried, along with his complicity, desire for recognition, and hidden sense of failure crashes back in the form of quiet devastation. Evidently, speechless with the confrontation, he gazes ahead into nature and the world he is surrounded by with a look of agony on his face.



Figure 33: Global detonation vision

As Einstein makes his exit, Oppenheimer calls out to him one last time and asks if he remembers the conversation they had years ago concerning the chances of atmospheric ignition. When Einstein says that he does recall that day, the father of the atomic bomb says, “I believe we did” (2:53:22). This moment is brimming with tension as this topic that was thrown around first as a serious concern, then again as a joke, is brought up one final time. It proves that this possibility had never left Oppenheimer's consciousness. Turns out, he had just been repressing it in order to go through with his plans, because admitting and acknowledging the chances of a world ending was too heavy to live with and carry with his operation. This signifies the suppressed resurfacing.

Freud's concept of the return of the repressed finds its home here, the idea that the psyche cannot suppress such immense guilt forever. The scientist's mind held onto facts, numbers, and probabilities for so long to fulfill his patriotic duties and scientific ambition. However, Freud asserts that what is repressed never vanishes; it nevertheless persists in the unconscious. Now, as the defense along with the ego collapses, he has nothing he could use anymore to camouflage the truth of what he has set in motion; a chain reaction that would one day destroy the world.



Figure 34: The psychological torture

Einstein leaves the scene, his face completely decomposed, and as the dramatic score picks up in intensity, a close-up shot of Oppenheimer's overwhelmed face fills the screen along with a glimpse into his imagination, flooding with images of himself standing in front of rockets, flying an army plane, or even the planet igniting (Figure 33). These apocalyptic visions signify the full return of the repressed, that he may have set the world on a path toward annihilation. Confronted with the weight of his legacy stands a man who has finally understood the price of his creation (Figure 34).

Conclusion

This chapter highlights the complex interplay between the Id, the ego, and the superego in order to understand Oppenheimer. It analyzes the reasoning behind why he subjected himself to the trial and public humiliation using the principle of the death drive.

Additionally, he developed repression as a defense mechanism. Thus, thanks to Freud's psychoanalysis literary theory, we thoroughly analyzed Oppenheimer's psyche and behavior that led to his political and psychological downfall according to Christopher Nolan's vision. We conclude that the protagonist is a complex character, struggling with inner contradictions. Under the surface of the genius scientist lays a man torn between patriotic duty, the pursuit of knowledge, and an overwhelming guilt that constantly resurfaces.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

This research examines the psychological framework of J. Robert Oppenheimer in Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer* (2023) through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis. The film's portrayal of Oppenheimer's pursuit of knowledge, emotional conflicts, and moral reckoning helps us understand how ambition, repression, and guilt framed his psyche, creating psychological turmoil in a man responsible for the World War II's fate. This study interprets the film not only as a biographical recounting but as a thorough character study of his profound psychological and ideological tensions.

Scientists like Oppenheimer who made great contributions to theoretical physics are considered the greatest minds of their time. They were forced to step out of the shadows and embrace the spotlight that inevitably followed the triumph of their creations. They become powerful influential figures who contributed to the shaping of humanity. The developments they brought are often criticized for their destructive nature. This duality made people perceive them as morally complex figures who come off as both saviors and threats. After the development of the atomic bomb, it became clear that their minds had no boundaries they were not willing to cross, especially when driven by scientific ambition. Their omnipotent drive to unlock the universe's secrets blurred the lines between discovery and the consequences they could mentally manage.

Oppenheimer was promoted and celebrated as a national hero, he was glorified when needed; however, once his creation served its purpose, and his moral convictions threatened the government's interests, they swiftly turned against him. While his brilliance was once useful, it was ultimately crushed by the same system he loyally served. This sequence of events leads him to acquire the status of martyrdom, as he is constantly compared to the tragic mythical figure of Prometheus.

Because of his tragic life, Oppenheimer's story has been the subject and inspiration of the collective imagination of artists like Sting with his song *Russians*, writers including Kai

Bird and Martin J. Sherwin, and filmmakers such as Christopher Nolan. Thus, why is the man who created an object that killed hundreds of thousands of people portrayed as a victim? And why are there different and complex narratives surrounding his life? Are these narrative portrayals a truly critical exploration of his moral conflict, or are they complicit in the glorification of a white man's fall from grace? Throughout this dissertation, we analyzed how Nolan tried to capture the complex undertone of this story in his film *Oppenheimer*.

For Oppenheimer, the act of creating the atomic bomb regardless of its intellectual implications is also fueled by deep personal reasons. The Manhattan Project consumed his entire life; everything revolved around the task. He dedicated years of his life and poured his ambition, loyalty, and genius into it. However, despite his devotion and good intentions, the project was linked to the machinery of war and the harming of human lives; therefore, it had never been pure and was always doomed to fall into a moral abyss.

As our work explored, Oppenheimer's journey is not only historical, it is also psychological. By using Freud's psychoanalytical theory, we have been able to explore the inner workings of his mind throughout his journey. Moreover, we analyze how his descent into guilt and repression is not the downfall of some political figure, but rather the collapse of a man who dared pursue knowledge blindly without foreseeing the damage it would lead to.

Freud divided the psyche into three parts; the Id, the ego, and the superego. He argued that the Id and the superego are in constant conflict, while the ego tries to mediate between them. In Oppenheimer's case, we concluded that his Id consists of his ambition that urges him towards success and recognition, while his superego is forged by the unbearable guilt that overwhelms him. Ultimately, the cost of his creation is the slow psychological erasure of his ego rationalizing id justifying his actions. This fracture is mostly evident in his post-war life as his repression develops into a defense mechanism. Nolan uses the bomb as a

metaphor because as his creation ends a real war, it marks the beginning of his own internal one.

Additionally, Oppenheimer is portrayed as someone stripped of authority and agency, caught in a system that first empowered him and then silenced him. This illusion of power in order to exploit his genius, and then alienate him completely, goes beyond political feud; it transcends into his psyche and intensifies his internal crisis. He is forced to bear responsibility without the ability to intervene, and therefore, is condemned to a state of torment and intolerable guilt. With this narrative, Nolan creates a figure that embodies the tragic scientist, revealing the disposability of even the most vital minds in the face of power and control. Throughout the years, Oppenheimer realizes that he cannot undo his mistakes and is caught up in a loop of guilt and self-punishment. He struggles to maintain the narrative of his life and attempts to redeem himself by playing the role of the good American patriot who spares no effort to monitor the manufacturing of atomic weapons of mass destruction and the creation of the Hydrogen bomb.

As the story unfolds, Freud's theory of the return of the repressed is proven right. Oppenheimer's repressed thoughts and guilt crawl back to the surface in the form of distressful images and hallucinations. This final return of the repressed is the movie's ultimate gesture to crack Oppenheimer's shell and deprive him of everything he usually clings to such as his martyrdom, fame, and intellectualism. He becomes entangled with the reality that there is no resolution or redemption to what he started.

We deduce that the final scene between the protagonist and Einstein does not conclude the narrative as much as it disorients it. The audience is taken back into the past fracturing the narrative one last time in order to reflect on the prophecy that has become his life. The final montage is materialization of the death drive, and for Oppenheimer, this means

that history does not forget and will never truly move on. Thus, his judgment will be forevermore revived.

This study makes it easier for the reader to understand the complexities of J. Robert Oppenheimer in Christopher Nolan's film, *Oppenheimer*. In order to make this possible, we used a Freudian approach to humanize and portray his complexities and the moral convictions he struggles with, not as an iconic historical figure but a human being, haunted by doubt and the weight of his creation. All done in a world where patriotic duty and scientific ambition converge in a single individual, and emerge as an important and necessary conversation that reflects on moral dilemmas that are continuously relevant. This work is aimed at those who seek to understand the price to pay when achieving greatness and the burden that accompanies the ones who pursue it.

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Résumé

Cette recherche est une étude psychanalytique du personnage historique de J. Robert Oppenheimer tel qu'il est représenté dans le film *Oppenheimer* (2023) de Christopher Nolan. À travers une lecture fondée sur la théorie freudienne, cette étude analyse la complexité psychologique d'Oppenheimer, en se focalisant particulièrement sur les mécanismes inconscients qui motivent ses actions, ainsi qu'aux dilemmes moraux qu'il affronte tout au long de son parcours. Cette analyse est divisée en deux chapitres, le premier procure le cadre historique et théorique nécessaires pour une compréhension approfondie du sujet. Pour le deuxième chapitre, il s'est basé sur une analyse profonde du psychique du protagoniste. Il explore les forces psychologiques qui sont à l'origine de ses choix, notamment son ambition scientifique, son patriotisme et ses conflits moraux qui s'intensifient à mesure que le Projet de Manhattan progresse. Cette partie révèle aussi l'effondrement psychologique du personnage après les bombardements d'Hiroshima et de Nagasaki. Elle met en relief sa culpabilité réprimée, le retour du refoulé, ainsi que la mise en scène de la chute d'un homme autrefois glorifié puis marginalisé par le pouvoir politique. En s'appuyant sur la tripartition freudienne du psychisme (ça, moi, surmoi), l'étude démontre les tensions intérieures qui marquent le scientifique moderne Oppenheimer, maître de la destruction et victime de ses propres actes. Par ailleurs, l'intérêt de cette recherche réside dans son originalité, le film étant encore récent et peu exploré dans le champ universitaire. Le manque de travaux critiques sur ce sujet laisse ainsi place à de nouvelles perspectives d'enrichir la compréhension de sa profondeur psychologique et thématique.

ملخص

هذه الأطروحة هي دراسة شخصية تاريخية لشخصية ج. روبرت أوبنهايمر، كما جسدها فيلم كريستوفر نولان أوبنهايمر (2023). لدراسة العوامل النفسية الكامنة وراء سلوكه، تستقي هذه الدراسة من نظرية التحليل النفسي الفرويدي لفهم آليات عقله الباطنية، والدوافع اللاواعية والصراعات الداخلية الكامنة وراء قراراته. يغطي هذا البحث سنوات دراسته الجامعية، دوره المحوري في مشروع مانهاتن الشهير، صناعة القنبلة الذرية، وسقوطه في نهاية المطاف خلال جلسة الاستماع الأمنية عام 1954. تُحلّل شخصية أوبنهايمر كشخص يعاني من الشعور بالذنب والقمع ورغبة لا تليّن في الموت. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تقديم إطار نظري واضح، ودراسة نقدية للأبعاد النفسية والأخلاقية لأوبنهايمر. تستكشف كيف بُنيت حياته على الطموح العلمي والسلطة السياسية والصراع الأخلاقي، ثم حطمتها في النهاية. علاوة على ذلك، تكمن قيمة هذا البحث في أصالته، حيث لا يزال الفيلم حديثاً نسبياً ولم يُستكشف بعد. إن النقص الكبير في الأبحاث العلمية المتعلقة بهذا الموضوع يترك مساحة كبيرة لوجهاً تنظر نقدية جديدة من شأنها أن تساهم في فهم عمقه النفسي والموضوعي.