A Jungian & Nietzschean Approach to Todd Phillips' *Joker*

Todd Phillips'in *Joker* Filmine Jungcu ve Nietzscheci bir Yaklaşım

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ABSTRACT

Todd Phillips' *Joker* (2019) is an origin story which not only portrays a psychological drama but also forms a good example of a detailed character study case. The film embodies two main layers which are psychological and social. Within the context of the psychological layer, the viewers witness the gradual metamorphosis of a mentally-ill person into an evil villain. This article aims to analyse Todd Phillips' *Joker* from a Jungian and Nietzschean perspective. By interpreting Arthur Fleck's mental condition through the window of Jungian archetypes, the article reveals that Arthur experiences an intense inner struggle against his shadow, which he ultimately loses. His efforts to resist these attacks using his persona, ego, and self are in vain. To that end, Jung's views are interconnected with Friedrich Nietzsche's notion of nihilistic delusions which are referred to with an overview of Nietzsche's nihilism. In addition, the nihilistic delusions are associated with the cotard syndrome and the notion of depersonalization within the field of psychiatry. The study also exposes the common ground between Nietzsche and Jung by exploring the interactions in specific periods of their lives. Thus, it has been concluded that Arthur's nihilistic delusions are the ultimate cause of the events leading to the supremacy of the shadow in *Joker*.
Keywords: *Joker*, Carl G. Jung, Friedrich Nietzsche, the shadow, archetypes

ÖZ

Todd Phillips'in *Joker* (2019) filmi sadece psikolojik bir dram sunmakla kalmamaktadır, ayrıntılı bir karakter vakasını gözler önüne sermektedir. *Joker* filminde psikolojik ve sosyal olmak üzere iki temel katman bulunmaktadır. Psikolojik katman bağlamında izleyiciler, ruhsal anlamda hasta bir bireyin yavaşça kötü bir katile dönüşmesine tanıklık etmektedir. Bu makale, Todd Phillips'in *Joker* yapımını Jungcu ve Nietzscheci bakış açısıyla analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Arthur'un ruhsal durumunu Jung'un arketipleri penceresinden yorumlayan bu çalışma, onun kendi içinde bulunan gölge arketipine karşı vermiş olduğu yoğun mücadeleyi açığa çıkarmaktadır ki Arthur bu mücadeleyi kaybetmeye mahkûmdur. Arthur'un gölge figürünün persona, ego ve kendiliğini kullanarak tüm bu saldırılara karşı direnme çabası tamamıyla nafiledir. Bu bağlamda, Jung'a ait kavramlar, Friedrich Nietzsche'nin nihilizm ve nihilist kuruntular kavramları ile karşılaştırmalı olarak irdelenmektedir. Buna ek olarak, nihilist kuruntular olgusu, psikiyatri alanında tanımlanan cotard sendromu ve kişiliği kaybetme gibi olgularla ilişkilendirmektedir. Çalışma, ayrıca Nietzsche ve

Jung'un hayatlarının belirli dönemlerinde yaşadıkları etkileşimleri ve ortak yönlerini de açığa çıkarmaktadır. Bunlara bağlı olarak çalışmanın sonucunda *Joker* filminde nihilist kuruntuların, gölge figürünün egemenliğine giden yoldaki temel sebep olduğu sonucuna varılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Joker*, Carl G. Jung, Friedrich Nietzsche, gölge, arketipler, nihilist kuruntular

Introduction: *Joker* as an Origin Story

Todd Phillips' *Joker* (2019) has won two Academy Awards with recognition from audiences worldwide. The film displays the birth of the hysterical and highly depressed character called the Joker. Produced as a precursor to but not in direct connection with the *Batman* series, *Joker* leaves out Batman and solely focuses on the Joker throughout the film. Another major difference from the *Batman* films is that *Joker* is produced as a psychological thriller whereas the previous ones were shot as classical American superhero films. This shift in genre and tone reflects many changes within the scope of the production.

Joker tells the conspicuous story of Arthur Fleck, a disadvantaged clown struggling to get by in the merciless streets of Gotham City. Fleck suffers from pseudobulbar syndrome, commonly defined as attacks of uncontrollable laughter or cries. Fleck lives under grave conditions as he is obliged to take care of his desperately ill and needy mother. Arthur's low socio-economic profile is observed through their apartment and the job that he literally battles for. His job as an entertaining clown not only falls short of providing decent living standards but also marks the beginning of a long term inner crisis that will cause a great shift in Fleck's personality.

Joker bears some serious differences with the previously released *Batman* productions. Mainly due to its psychological thriller genre, the spotlight is directed on the protagonist throughout the film. Therefore, a tremendous responsibility lies on the shoulders of the leading actor, Joaquin Phoenix. From the beginning until the end, the viewers witness Arthur Fleck's quest and transformation from an ordinary street clown into the infamous Joker. While there are many incidents that play a vital role in the shift of Fleck's character, this shift in character is displayed in the form of a gradual process which builds up very slowly but at the same time meticulously.

This article aims to expose Jungian and Nietzschean reflections in *Joker*. To that end, the film is discussed from the Jungian perspective of archetypes in general and the persona and shadow in specific. Arthur's gradual mutation from the persona into the shadow is demonstrated with particular scenes from the film. In relation to Jung's archetypes, the article also argues reflections of nihilistic delusion in *Joker*. Thus, it is also argued how these manifestations of Nihilistic delusion converge with C.G. Jung's shadow in *Joker*. Finally, the Jungian shadow is compared and contrasted with the Nietzschean formulation of nihilism, thereby establishing the intersection between

analytical psychology and philosophy. While the film focuses predominantly on the character of Arthur Fleck, a gradual escalation of social riots persists alongside the individual story of Joker. However, Arthur's individual quest is soon intertwined with the social protests at the end of the film. When Arthur's shift into the Joker is finally complete, he finds himself amongst the rioters to emerge as the iconic leader of the social protest movement. This symbolic scene marks the victory of the Joker and the end of Arthur Fleck.

Jung's Persona & Shadow: Contrasting but Completing Entities

Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) was a Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who was the founder of analytical psychology. During his lifetime, Jung established his own school of psychology and had an immense influence on a variety of disciplines including literature, anthropology, philosophy, and theology. One of Jung's most groundbreaking theories is his archetypes. Jung defined archetypes as:

> An indispensable correlate of the idea of the collective unconscious indicates the existence of definite forms in the psyche which seem to be present always and everywhere. Mythological research calls them "motifs" […] From these references it should be clear enough that my idea of the archetype—literally a pre-existent form—does not stand alone but is something that is recognized and named in other fields of knowledge. (Jung, 2014, pp. 56-57)

Jung coined archetypes as the various images that persist in the human psyche and supports his theory with statements from influential scientists of other domains of science. Jung demonstrates that his theory of archetypes has validity in different sections of the scientific spectrum. Carl Jung identifies numerous archetypes but specifically determines five universal archetypes which are the self, the ego, the persona, anima/animus, and the shadow.

The persona is described as: "the individual's system of adaptation to, or the manner he assumes in dealing with, the world" (Jung, 2014, p. 126). It is interpreted as the mask humans wear when exposed to the outer world. On many occasions, people tend to conceal their true character by wearing an artificial mask. The persona is often used in a pragmatic context. Therefore, humans intentionally hide their unwanted and

unanticipated features and solely display their preferable qualities which reflect them at their best. In other words: "the persona is that which in reality one is not, but which oneself as well as others think one is" (Jung, 2014, p. 126). Thus, the persona could be paraphrased as the artificially reflected sides of one's true personality, and people often tend to use it for pragmatic reasons.

The persona is also defined as: "that aspect of an individual which is in relation to the outer world. It derives from the Greek word for 'mask' and denotes those masks that were worn by actors in performing comic/tragic parts in Greek plays" (Casement, 2001, p. 142). In that sense, the masks people wear, not only help to conceal their true identities but also enable them to assume acceptable roles that conform to the expectations of others. Thus, those traits that are undesired or simply need to be ignored are kept safe thanks to the persona. In some cases, it becomes imperative for humans to put on their masks and pretend to be someone else for the mere purpose of survival (2001, p. 142). However, a psychologically sane human being is able to obtain a balance between the persona and the self. Any kind of imbalance might result in unwanted, grave conditions. Carl G. Jung puts forward that there is an endless number of archetypes. Jung purports that:

> There are as many archetypes as there are typical situations in life. Endless repetition has engraved these experiences into our psychic constitution, as forms without content, representing merely the possibility of a certain type of perception and action. (Jung, 2014, p. 48)

To that end, this article concentrates on the opposing but complementary archetypes of the persona and shadow. The archetype which stands at the focal centre of this article and of *Joker* is the shadow. While the persona and the shadow possess a contrasting function, the presence of both of these archetypes serves to maintain a harmonious balance in one's character. In other words, these two archetypes along with the self, ego, and the animus/anima are all components of a larger whole. These complete one another in maintaining a fully formed, balanced personality. While the persona is the acceptable version of a human's character, the shadow eventually represents all that is unacceptable and even destructive on some occasions. Therefore, the shadow is generally associated with the evil, darker side of a human being. As a matter of fact, all types of negative connotations are assigned to the shadow: "all those parts of our personal life which have been deemed unsuitable and denied collect around a single

archetypal core. Everything we regard as bad, as "not us," accumulates around this center" (Robertson, 2016, p. 197). Hence, the shadow embodies all undesired and suppressed characteristics.

Jung refers to one's actual being as the self and all divergences from the self are manifested in two areas: the conscious and the unconscious. In the conscious, this is displayed in the form of the persona, which is highly controlled and administered, whereas in the unconscious, the equivalent is a wild beast referred to as the shadow. All that is rejected and supressed into the unconscious accumulates and comes to existence as the shadow. Jung illustrates the shadow with the following words:

> We do not like to look at the shadow-side of ourselves; therefore there are many people in our civilized society who have lost their shadow altogether; they have got rid of it. They are only two-dimensional; they have lost the third dimension, and with it they have usually lost the body. (Jung, 1968, p. 23)

Jung contends that humans tend to exclude the shadow due to the reason that it does not conform to the commonly accepted norms of the civilised society. The three-dimensional structure Jung mentions is that of the self, the persona, and the shadow. This is the structure that makes up any human being, and in case one of these was missing, this whole would become incomplete. Thus, despite being negative in context, Jung affirms the necessity of all three archetypes, including the shadow, to constitute a greater whole. While studying people's dreams, Jung observed that dreamers had seen visions of their shadow in forms of non-human, horrific creatures such as vampires and werewolves. However, Jung noticed that this tendency evolved from non-human visions to alien human visions which the dreamer visualised in his/her own mind. These visions represented black, dark-skinned people or people belonging to other races and ethnic origins (Robertson, 2016, p. 197). It is worth noting that these visions display a shift from the familiar to the unfamiliar and from abstract to concrete forms (2016, p. 198).

As the shadow is an integral part of the psyche, it manifests itself on certain occasions, one of which is dreams. The shadow might be reflected onto dreams while at the same time, it may as well be reflected onto the real world. Relying on the experiences he gained through patient therapies, Jung came to the conclusion that humans need to acknowledge and come to terms with their shadow as a distinct element of their psyche

(Robertson, 2016, p. 199). In this case, the archetype is represented by the experiences which have accumulated around this image rather than the image itself. In addition it is pointed out that: "archetypes are beyond any individual's ability to integrate into the personality and cannot be integrated into individual consciousness without doing great harm to that individual consciousness" (2016, pp. 200-201). Hence, integrating the shadow into an individual's consciousness might result in serious, problematic situations which are demonstrated in Todd Phillips' *Joker*.

In addition, the ego is roughly defined as one's own perception of identity, and its relationship with the self is vital in maintaining a healthy psychology (2016, p. 180). The distance between the ego and the self determines the scope of the shadow. If the distance becomes too much, the shadow emerges as a form of reparation (2016, p. 202). It is therefore essential to preserve a balance between the ego and the self so as to keep the shadow safely present in the unconscious. In addition, the shadow exists in every individual's unconscious and is generally constituted from personal affairs (2016, p. 202). All that accumulates within the shadow are mostly personal problems that are either supressed or refused.

Jung emphasises that living in harmony with one's shadow is of utmost importance for human beings. He affirms that the shadow cannot be dismissed or neglected as if it does not exist. The existence of the shadow acts as a constant reminder of human being's inner struggle and vulnerability (Jung, et. al., 1973, p. 21). Jung explains the shadow through the use of an analogy:

> The shadow is a tight passage, a narrow door, whose painful constriction no one is spared who goes down to the deep well. For what comes after the door is, surprisingly enough, a boundless expanse full of unprecedented uncertainty, with apparently no inside and no outside, no above and no below, no here and no there, no mine and no thine, no good and no bad. It is the world of water, where all life floats in suspension; where the realm of the sympathetic system, the soul of everything living, begins; where I am indivisibly this and that; where I experience the other in myself and the other-than-myself experiences me. (1973, pp. 21-22)

Thus, Jung portrays the shadow as a path full of unknowns and ambiguity. It is the sphere of the second personality within the individual which is a mystery but nonetheless

requires to be perceived and recognised as an entity. Besides the individual aspect, the shadow also possesses a social prospect. It stands for all that does not fit into the norms of the society: "it represents compromises a person does not wish to make with society, the shadow is the dwelling place for evil and those contents that do not correspond with his/her personal self-image or mask" (LaLlave & Gutheil, 2012, p. 461). Hence, it is thereby revealed that the shadow is the perfect hiding post for all evil thoughts and tendencies. Therefore, it is necessary to keep the shadow under control as: "when the unconscious floods the conscious, the shadow influences behavior and may cause the expert to feel and act out of control" (2012, p. 461).

Finally, the shadow also possesses an extremely dangerous potential in case it is manifested into a collective body. This collective shadow is regarded as the psychological essence behind totalitarian regimes including the Nazis in Germany. Therefore it is maintained that: "the shadow is the archetype that has the most immediate political impact when it is projected on to other peoples or countries" (Lewin, 2009, p. 207). Its danger resides in the accumulation of collective evil and the outcomes are likely to be catastrophic and beyond human imagination. This outcome is openly demonstrated through the social riots at the end of *Joker*.

Arthur's Metamorphosis: The Shadow's Supremacy

Joker is an origin story that recounts the transformation of Arthur Fleck into the Joker. This transformation is displayed in a gradual manner with revelations about the personal past of Arthur Fleck, which can be revealed through the sub-text of the film. There are two layers in the sub-text of *Joker* which create the conditions that result in the birth of the Joker as a dominant figure. The first is the social layer and the second, the psychological layer which is the most prominent.

The social sphere of Gotham City is depicted as being a jungle of social inequality. From the first scene until the last, the viewers are bombarded by the sight of piles of garbage left out on the streets due to an ongoing strike. This is an obvious reference to the dysfunctional state of government administration as well as an indication of the rising poverty. Gotham City is a place where chaos, mayhem, and violence are common aspects that are taken for granted by the elite and by the authorities. The escalating class conflict causes mass protests, acts of violence, and a high crime rate throughout Gotham City. Unemployment, poverty, social inequality, and the government's

incapability and unwillingness to lend a helping hand to its citizens are reflected during the first scenes of the film. Nevertheless, Arthur's personal quest evolves simultaneously with the social issues which are kept in the background of the film's focal point.

The second and most prominent sphere in *Joker* is the psychological layer. The whole film focuses on the character of Arthur Fleck and his metamorphosis into the Joker. The film begins with Arthur carrying out a session with a social worker. The session seems to be ineffective and executed as a mere formality. Arthur's uncontrollable laughter is introduced with the session. Besides his pseudobulbar attacks, Arthur takes seven different medications and is a person who does not value his own life and even questions his own identity. Arthur confesses that he was not even sure of his existence and admits in a way that he wants to manifest his existence.

When Arthur is around other people, he is doing his best to appear as a sympathetic and funny individual. These are the moments when his persona is dominant and predominantly visible. Arthur wants to make children happy by performing as a clown and pursues a career as a stand-up comedian. The manner in which he was raised has a central significance in his behaviour and mode of thinking. Arthur's mother, Penny Fleck, always told him that he was a good person: "She always tells me to smile and put on a happy face. She says that I was put here to spread joy and laughter" (*Joker*, 2019, [14.00]). However, this was only an artificial perception created and imposed on Arthur by his mother. For this reason, Arthur has been living the artificially created perception that his mother established all along. Arthur's persona was thus constituted and enforced by his mother and therefore, he has not been able to live his life with his actual identity. Arthur's relationship with his mother was problematic from the beginning as it is revealed that he suffered abuse at the hands of his mother when he was a child. As a consequence, Arthur grew up as a highly dependent person who lacked self-confidence and a positive self-awareness.

Arthur experiences a deep inner struggle which becomes more and more apparent as the film progresses. This particular inner struggle is that of the persona against the shadow. Arthur has been living the persona his mother designed for him. He always thinks of himself as a good person and takes pride in caring for his mom: "I've been the man of the house for as long as I can remember. I take good care of my mother" (*Joker*, 2019, [13.40]). He even fantasises about being appreciated for his goodness and compassion on the Murray Franklin show. Nonetheless, he undergoes manifestations

of his shadow on various occasions. To that end, Arthur's pseudobulbar laughing attacks are sudden manifestations of his shadow's existence, similar to a wild beast trapped inside the human body and screaming to get out of its confinement.

The turning point for the shadow's surfacing is when Arthur takes a tough beating in the street by youngsters while working as a clown. This is the first incident that causes radical change in Arthur's psyche. It is not the beating itself that causes this change in Arthur's psyche but the reactions he gets from the people around him. Arthur is humiliated by some of his friends and scolded by his boss who accuses him of stealing the sign that was broken by the young rascals. On the other hand, a couple of his friends show compassion for him, and one of them gives him a gun with the advice that he should stand up for himself. Arthur is devastated and disgusted by his boss's apathetic reaction, and at this point, his shadow breaks its chains to gradually rise to the surface. It is worth noting that the shadow starts taking full control after Arthur is forced to quit his medication. To that end, the seven different medications shared an immense role in suppressing the shadow.

Arthur starts to realise that the stories told by his mother are nothing but fairy tales, and in order to stand up for himself, he needs to fight power with power. Taking the gun to a children's hospital and accidentally dropping it in the middle of an act marks the last appearance of Arthur's persona. Upon being fired by his boss, Arthur enters a state of mental depression followed by a metamorphosis from persona into the shadow. The wild beast known as the shadow breaks loose to fully manifest existence and come to power. Therefore, the persona is no longer visible and soon disappears together with the character of Arthur Fleck whom fully re-emerges as the Joker.

The climax, where the shadow's existence overtly manifests itself, is when Arthur is harassed by three Wall Street men on a subway train. Upon seeing Arthur in his clown costume, the three men start harassing him, and due to his anxiety, Arthur begins to laugh uncontrollably. The men start beating Arthur before he is able to hand them over the card on which he explains his condition about the laughter. Arthur takes out his gun, shoots two of the men out of self-defence and kills them. He chases the third man who escapes to the exit and shoots him at the stairs of the subway. While Arthur, or now Joker, kills the first two men out of self-defence, the way he chases and kills the third man is surely not out of self-defence but a rather a deliberate and self-satisfying act of violence. He fires at the man multiple times, making sure he is dead.

This is the first scene where the shadow comes to surface, brutally killing the men and taking pleasure in doing so. Arthur kills the men in cold blood and realises that he is finally able to stand up for himself and this act of violence gives him a great sense of fulfilment. After the murders, Arthur never regrets killing those men because he is convinced that he has delivered justice in a city where it has been completely forgotten. Deep inside, Joker justifies his murder and does not feel any guilt because they were bad people who deserved to die. Arthur implements a highly subjective understanding of morality. Joker's justification forces him to believe that he is the one who is acting morally. To that end, Joker murders Randall, his mother at the hospital, and lastly Murray Franklin on his talk show. In the last scene of the film, the shadow or Joker speaks for himself: "comedy is subjective, isn't that what they say? All of you, the system that knows so much, you decide what's right or wrong. The same way you decide what's funny or not" (*Joker*, 2019, [01.42.15]).

In this scene, the shadow emerges to dominate and suppress Arthur's persona, ego, and self to create a hegemony that will introduce him into a life of terror and crime. The shadow finally manages to take over Arthur, paving the way for the Joker. Thus, Joker is a personification of Arthur's shadow. He is the embodiment of pure evil that knows no limits, no morality, and no empathy. The shadow emerges victorious from Arthur's inner conflict, pursues satisfaction, and pushes the limits to the extreme so as to fulfil its own destiny. Upon finding out that Penny was not his actual mother and that he was abused by her as a child, Joker does not hesitate to kill her in her hospital bed. With the shadow in charge, violence and murder are rationalised and carried out instantly without any hesitation.

As a personification of the shadow, Joker decides to make his appearance on the Murray Franklin show for two main reasons. While living in his cosy apartment with his mother, Arthur has been a dedicated fan of Murray Franklin. He pays effort not to miss his shows and watches them together with his mother. The actual reason why Arthur is so obsessed with Murray is the very fact that he sees a strong father figure in him. Murray represents the ideal father figure that Arthur has been missing all along. Therefore, he not only idolises Murray but also acknowledges him as a major role model. His aspirations to become a stand-up comedian could be interpreted as evidence of Arthur's deliberate imitation of Murray. Arthur desperately wants to manifest his existence by being recognised and admired as a funny and smart comedian like Murray. Arthur longs for two basic desires: recognition and manifestation of his existence.

In relation to Arthur's admiration, in *Joker*, there exists a very thin line between imagination and reality. Arthur Fleck is an extremely lonesome character. He is so solitary that his mind and his sub-conscious are obliged to compensate this grave condition by the use of his own imagination. In the final scene, Joker is heartbroken by Murray and kills him because Murray not only did not accept his role as the father figure Arthur had imagined him as, but also preferred to humiliate him in front of millions on national television. Joker's disillusionment manifests itself in the shape of an outburst of violence which he, once again, justifies and responds to by murdering him in cold blood. Arthur basically kills Murray for rejecting his request to become a father figure and for making fun of him as a failed, novice comedian.

Friedrich Nietzsche's Nihilism & the Nihilistic Delusion

Apart from Carl Jung's shadow archetype, another notion that plays an equally pivotal role in *Joker* is Nietzsche's Nihilism. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche is one of the most influential and popular thinkers of western philosophy. Born in Germany in 1844, Nietzsche had a tremendous effect on modern history, western culture, and philosophy. Nietzsche's notions of the übermensch, the will to power, and eternal recurrence are to this day being studied by scholars of philosophy, history, and philology around the world. While Nietzsche has brought great innovation to the sphere of philosophy, most of his work still remains discussed and regarded as controversial.

One of the notions that Nietzsche is commonly associated with is Nihilism. Many thinkers and philosophers have conducted studies on Nihilism from Plato to Derrida and Kierkegaard. However, Friedrich Nietzsche has interpreted nihilism both from a social and psychological scope. Nietzsche's starting point was the limitedness of human perception and of the human being itself:

> The human being is a symbolic animal whose understanding of 'reality' is conditioned by the language it uses. Its experience of the world is mediated through language and through the concepts it employs to master reality. A change in concepts means a change in our conceptual understanding of the world. For Nietzsche it is the advent of 'nihilism' which provides the opportunity for a revolution in language and knowledge, involving both a revaluation of old values and the creation of new ones. (Ansell-Pearson, 1994, p. 35)

Thus, Nietzsche believed that a human being needed to transcend the limitations brought about by his/her own physical state and existence. According to the philosopher, Nihilism provided the means to exceed human restrictions and excel to a different level of awareness. However, Nietzsche had a fear of Nihilism and considered it to be inevitable at the same time. He was afraid of it due to the reason that it would lead to ethical breakdown and metaphysical disintegration (Ansell-Pearson, 1994, p. 202). Therefore, nihilism was seen as dangerous but unavoidable and at some point had to be dealt with. As the notion bears a contradiction within itself, humans had to face it sooner or later.

Nietzsche also identified the motives of nihilism and asserted that these were: "social distress, physiological degeneration, corruption, widespread pessimism, and so on" (1994, p. 36). It ought to be stressed that the motives Nietzsche identifies are located both in the social and psychological domains. The philosopher observed that mental and social issues formed the infrastructure of nihilism. Nihilism is roughly described as a loss of values and the persistence of nothingness. This emptiness of meaning is what Nietzsche coins as a: "pathological transitional stage" (1994, p. 36). Another reformulation of Nihilism puts forward that it is: "a psychological experience of weariness, distrust, apathy, and hopelessness" (1994, p. 38).

On the other hand, Nietzsche's formulation of Nihilism contained and presented some problems. The main problem was that his understanding of devaluation resulted in an emptiness of values. In this case, the outcome is that nothing is accepted as true: All political structures and political modes of thinking are exposed as lies or myth. (Plato's noble myth; Hobbes' fiction of the state of nature; Rousseau's notion of the 'Supreme Being'; modern democracy's belief in the equality of all individuals, and so on) (Ansell-Pearson, 1994, p. 39)

All is in vain and all is nothing. Nietzsche affirms that the sole meaning of the human being is meaninglessness itself. Every single value and principle that has been ascribed by humans since the beginning of human history is void of meaning and the time of acknowledgment will arrive. Nietzsche himself wrote that humans had no purpose and meaning in life:

> The will for man and earth was lacking; behind every great human destiny there sounded as a refrain a yet greater "in vain!" This is precisely what the

ascetic ideal means: that something was lacking, that man was surrounded by a fearful void---he did not know how to justify, to account for, to affirm himself; he suffered from the problem of his meaning. He also suffered otherwise, he was in the main a sickly animal: but his problem was not suffering itself, but that there was no answer to the crying question, "why do I suffer?" (1989, p. 162)

To that end, humans suffered from the problem of meaning as they were in a constant search for meaning and the truth. The will to nothingness relieved humans from this futile quest as the never ending struggle posed a serious burden for people. The philosopher asserts that: "man would rather will the nothing than not will" (Schacht, 1994, p. 33). Thereby, the human will to assert existence through will is affirmed. Nietzsche further maintains that:

A will to nothingness, an aversion to life, a revolt against the most fundamental preconditions of life—but it is and remains a will! . . . And to finish up by repeating what I said at the beginning: man will sooner will nothingness than not will. (2009, p. 135)

Nietzsche highlights that this struggle to achieve meaning leads to suffering from life: "It is not suffering in life that is problematic for Nietzsche – indeed, existence is suffering – but suffering from life" (Baker, 2018, p. 149). As both a personal and social drive, the pursuit of meaning bears various negative consequences.

In addition, the belief of one's own death is commonly acknowledged as 'Cotard Syndrome' in psychiatry. Cotard's account of nihilistic delusions is of a complicated nature and incorporates delusions concerning the self, the body, all perceived objects, and the world in holistic terms (Radovic, 2016, p. 680). During this process, the patients refuse allegations and may resist to do what is asked of them. Moreover, they may blame themselves for the condition and exhibit a general state of culpability and insignificance (2016, p. 680). In a review about Cotard Syndrome, among 100 cases: 89% were detected to have depression, anxiety in 65%, guilt in 63%, hypochondriacal delusions in 58%, and immortality delusions in 55% of the cases (2016, p. 681). Moreover, Cotard Syndrome is also closely associated with depersonalisation which is observed in cases where the patient suffers from: "estrangement, a disturbed sense of the self or the body, and a distinct sense of being detached from the world, and occasionally a

sense of deadness among other symptoms" (2016, p. 681). For this reason, depersonalisation appears to intersect with symptoms of Cotard Syndrome, and therefore, both share the same phenomenological basis (2016, p. 682). Thus, Cotard Syndrome is the psychiatric manifestation of nihilistic delusions. While no concrete medical evidence is presented in *Joker*, it could be assumed that Arthur Fleck is suffering from Cotard Syndrome as the symptoms indicate this disorder.

Inspiring Interactions: F. Nietzsche & C. G. Jung

Jung's shadow and Nietzsche's nihilistic delusions possess a central role in Todd Phillips' *Joker*, and the convergence of these two names is by no means a coincidence as both men crossed paths in their lifetime. There have been certain noteworthy interactions between Carl G. Jung and Friedrich Nietzsche. Jung was strongly influenced by Nietzsche's writings about spiritism and made a serious contribution to shape his ideas concerning materialism and the non-existent state of the spirit, acknowledging that the mind was homogenous to the brain (Bishop, 1995, p. 4). Moreover, Jung was especially influenced by Nietzsche's prominent work: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as this became obvious from his seminar on the psychological interpretation of the subject and the widespread mention (87 times) of the word "Zarathustra" in his published works (Domenici, 2019, p. 5). Gaia Domenici explains the frequent presence of Nietzsche in Jung's works:

> Sometimes the purpose of such mentions is to show Nietzsche as a clinical case; at other times, the philosopher appears to Jung as anticipating some of the key concepts of analytical psychology and revealing deep and aware experiences with what he calls the 'unconscious'. (2019, p. 5)

Thus, it ought to be stated that Friedrich Nietzsche was one of Carl G. Jung's early teachers at the *Oberes Gymnasium* in Basel but retired during Jung's years as a university student (2019, p. 5). Afterwards, it was *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* that had a profound effect on Jung and his encounter with the unconscious. Jung considered *Zarathustra* to possess a distinct place in the domain of philosophy as it made use of the intuitive source and thereby liberated himself from the connection of the intellect. Also, while Jung was developing his theory of archetypes, he associated Nietzsche with the archetype of the wise old man and a voice for the unconscious (Domenici, 2019, pp. 8-9). Moreover, Nietzsche's Übermensch is related to Jung's notion of the Self in a holistic

context which both philosophers refer to as names of the healthy whole self (Huskinson, 2004, p. 161). However, there also exist some differences of opinions between these two:

> Jung maintains that creativity must come from outside the individual, so that the whole self is a matter of discovery, while Nietzsche maintains that creativity is found within the individual, so that the whole self is a matter of creation. (Huskinson, 2004, p. 162)

It is also speculated that Jung rejected some of Nietzsche's notions and shared an ambiguous attitude towards him due to the fear of being associated with Nietzsche's insanity. This is the reason why despite resemblances, Jung rejects Nietzsche's impact on his work (2004, p. 462). As a result, it could be asserted that interpretations of Nietzsche's works enabled Jung the necessary infrastructure to establish the notional scope in which to set up his analytical psychology as a school of psychology that is distinguishable from Freudian psychoanalysis in purpose and method (Bishop, 1995, p. 364).

On the other hand, there are also remarkable differences between Jung and Nietzsche, one of which is their understanding of the doctrine of eternal recurrence. Nietzsche associates it with Nihilism and lack of meaning whereas Jung relates it to archetypes which, themselves embody meaning (1995, p. 365). From a general perspective, Nietzsche relied on Greek antiquity for his ideas and notions whereas Jung mainly focused on mysticism and Gnosticism (1995, p. 366). However, their most common quality was the myths of Apollo and Dionysos which both philosophers based their works on (1995, p. 371). Therefore, Nietzsche and Jung represent the conflict between the rational and irrational perspective:

> By arguing, that Dionysos must be united with Apollo for the moment of tragic insight to occur and be sustained, Nietzsche suggests that the highest wisdom comes only through a bonding of certain opposites. Similarly, through his self-overcoming, the Superman unites both Apollonian and Dionysian tendencies. (Bishop, 1995, p. 378)

From Jung's viewpoint, these tendencies are combined within the consciousness (Apollo) and unconsciousness (Dionysos) to constitute the Dionysian self (Bishop, 1995,

p. 378). All in all, despite their differences, Nietzsche and Jung incorporate and manifest a common ground that depends on the Romantic and German idealist tradition (1995, p. 379).

The Portrait of a Nihilistic Delusional Clown: Arthur Fleck

Joker represents a dark and gloomy voyage into a nihilistic state of mind. Arthur Fleck suffers from a deep mental breakdown which manifests itself in the form of nihilistic delusions. As an individual, he is constantly depressed, hopeless, and delusional. At the first scene, he reveals his state of mind to the social worker:

> Until a little while ago it was like nobody ever saw me. Even I didn't know if I really existed […] All I have are negative thoughts. But you don't listen anyway. I said, for my whole life I didn't know if I even really existed. But I do. And people are starting to notice. (*Joker*, 2019, [40.20])

Arthur persistently questions his own existence. Not only does he think that his own existence is meaningless, but he also experiences problems acknowledging his own being. His continual negative thoughts are bothering him to the extent of mental torture. Combined with social and economic harshness, Arthur's only consolation are the seven medications prescribed by the doctors at the hospital. Ironically, with the state cutting the funds, this comfort and ease is to disappear soon. Arthur's whole life consists of depression, economic hardships, and delusional attacks. It is almost as if his whole life is based on suffering. Therefore, Arthur writes in his journal: "I just hope my death makes more cents than my life" (*Joker*, 2019, [06.20]). This is the extent of how worthless and meaningless he considers his life to be. While the conditions are getting tougher every single day, Arthur feels that nobody can help him and soon finds himself in an utterly desperate condition.

Arthur suffers from nihilistic delusions, and this is exposed when the line between fantasy and reality gets more and more blurred. He starts seeing hallucinations and becomes a mere subject of his own imagination. Due to the mental torment he suffers from the reality, Arthur finds refuge in fantasy but soon gets caught up to such an extent that he begins to have trouble distinguishing reality from fantasy. His delusional state and hallucinations cause a detachment from reality and deterioration of his mental condition. While the film does not directly express the hallucinatory scenes, it can be

inferred that Arthur's first appearance on the Murray Franklin show and the scenes where he depicted a happy companionship with his attractive neighbour, Sophie Dumond, were simply a product of his imagination. Arthur does not appear on the Murray Franklin show until the last scene of the film and never actually has an affair with his neighbour. This is revealed when Arthur confuses reality with fantasy and enters Sophie's apartment without her consent. Horrified at this sight, Sophie immediately tells him to get out of her house. This marks the extreme level that in Arthur's mind, reality is getting rather blurred and vague. From a psychiatric perspective, it could be asserted that Arthur is suffering from either Cotard Syndrome or from depersonalisation. Considering the fictional nature of the character Arthur Fleck, it is difficult to obtain a rational and definitive judgment on this matter.

Although he is aware of his mental breakdown, he is unable to stop his condition from getting worse. His journal reads: "The worst part about having a mental illness is…that people expect you to behave as if you don't" (*Joker*, 2019, [01.26.45]). Arthur resents society's lack of empathy, and compassion and its ruthlessness. He is simply unable to tolerate the double standards imposed on him by the system, and his response to this is destructive. Arthur comes to the realisation that the artificial personality designed by his mother is nothing but a pure scam and expresses this in the hospital room right before he suffocates her with a pillow:

> Oh, Penny. I always hated that name. You used to tell me that my laugh was a condition, that there was something wrong with me. There isn't. That's the real me. Happy. I haven't been happy one minute of my entire life. You know it's funny. You know what really makes me laugh? I used to think my life was a tragedy, but now I realize it's a fucking comedy. (*Joker*, 2019, [01.20.04])

When Arthur finds out from the medical records that he was adopted and abused by his mother, he exhibits an uncontrollable rage due to the realisation that the life he had been living was an immense lie. This comes as a major blow to Arthur who is unable to deal with it. Now, more than ever, the tragedy he thought he had been living has become a true comedy. His meaningless existence and his negative self-esteem reach such an extreme level that from then on, he feels that he has nothing left to lose. From this moment, the nihilistic delusions Arthur experiences transform into a destructive fury that appears to grow out of control. Arthur is no longer the weakling that everyone

pushes around, the fragile figure that is dominated and suppressed by others. He decides to take control but rather in the utmost violent and evil manner possible. Arthur's response to the nihilistic delusions exhibits a serious lack of morality and upholds justification of violence.

Arthur's violent responses prove that he is in desperate need of medication and urgent treatment. However, due to the impassive and indifferent nature of the health-care and social system, Arthur has been abandoned to his fate. Right after he murders his mother at the hospital, his friends Randall and Gary pay him a visit. Arthur makes an important confession: "but no, I feel good. I stopped taking my medication. I feel a lot better now" (*Joker*, 2019, [01.26.50]). Arthur's statement bears such an irony as he ascribes negative value to his medicine. He almost speaks as if his medicine caused him to be delusional. This confession is of utmost significance because by stating this, he admits that without his medicine, his nihilistic delusional condition has taken over Arthur to lead the way to the birth of the Joker. Ironically enough, Arthur kills Randall brutally for lying to his boss about how he had obtained his gun. After the murder of his mother, Arthur is no more, and Joker is finally born. This marks Arthur's transformation into Joker. Note that he paints his face in his apartment right after he kills his mother at the hospital. On the one hand, he is preparing himself for his appearance on the Murray Franklin show, while on the other, he is symbolically welcoming the supremacy of the Joker.

Conclusion

Joker is a psychological origin story with multiple social implications. The social layer of the film could be the subject matter for another research article. Nonetheless, despite the dominance of the psychological aspects, the social background plays an essential role in the creation of Joker. Social inequality, poor health-care, and extreme class conflict are some of the elements that contribute to Arthur's deteriorating mental condition. The state's cutting of Arthur's medication and the failed therapy sessions are concrete examples of how the corrupt social system gradually brings forward the shadow figure within Arthur. This shadow figure was always inside of Arthur, waking up once in a while at specific times when it was stimulated. These are the social conditions that led this monster to take over Arthur permanently.

Moreover, as a psychological drama, *Joker* relies mainly on the psychological sphere. From the very first scene until the last, the viewers witness the slow metamorphosis

of Arthur Fleck into Joker. During the first scenes, Arthur attempts to use his persona to overcome the problems caused by his extremely troubled past. He plays the good person, doing his best to act funny and merciful but, nevertheless, soon comes to the realisation that the more he reflects his persona, the more he gets oppressed and tortured. Therefore, he decides to let go of the monster inside him and can no longer resist his nihilistic delusions before he completely releases the shadow to assume and fully embrace the figure of the Joker.

At the end of the film, the Joker kills Murray in cold blood for insulting and humiliating him. The last scene shows the Joker arrested in a police car, taken to the authorities to be delivered to justice. While in the police car, Joker stares at the riots from his window and takes deep pleasure in them not because he supports the social protests or the riots but simply because he loves watching the city of Gotham being burned down to the ground. It is worth mentioning that the Joker has no affiliation with the protests or the rioters. He neither cares about them nor gives them any attention. Joker also bears no affiliation with any political movement. Joker's quest is a quest for the manifestation of existence, and the social protests only seem to coincide with his personal quest. The Joker states this right before killing Murray: "C'mon, Murray, do I look like the kind of clown who could start a movement? I killed those guys because they were awful. Everybody's awful these days. It's enough to make anyone crazy" (*Joker*, 2019, [01.42.42]).

This is where Joker confesses that he acts out of pure selfish interest rather than for the common good or for the social protests. With the social layer remaining in the background of the film, the psychological layer dominates the entire film to highlight the creation of the figure of the Joker. However, criticism is directed towards the superficial development of the social protests escalating in the background of the story. If the protests and the riots had received more attention, their intersection with Joker's personal quest would have been much more realistic and convincing. In contrast, at the end of the film, some protestors crash against the police car where the Joker is held and take him out in a miraculous way, assigning him a controversial role as the leader of a movement he had absolutely nothing to do with as he mentioned on the show: "so can you tell us about this look? When we spoke earlier you mentioned that this look is not a political statement, is that right? That's right Murray, I'm not political, I'm just trying to make people laugh" (*Joker*, 2019, [01.39.24]). In the final scene, Joker lies on the car severely wounded but still manages to rise up to be surrounded by

random protestors who hail him as their prophetic and iconic leader. Symbolic and spectacular as this scene may be, it nevertheless happens out of pure coincidence and lacks the necessary realism and credibility.

The connection between Jung and Nietzsche cannot be ignored as Jung himself admitted that he was greatly influenced by Nietzsche:

> The meaning of my existence is that life has addressed a question to me. That is a supra-personal task, which I accompany only by effort and with difficulty. Perhaps it is a question which preoccupied my ancestors, and which they could not answer? Could that be why I am so impressed by the problem on which Nietzsche foundered: the Dionysian side of life, to which the Christian seems to have lost the way? (Jung, 1965, p. 350)

Considering this vast influence, it is thus not surprising that a similar connection can be established in Todd Phillips' *Joker*. The obvious manifestation of the shadow archetype cannot be considered independent from Arthur's nihilistic delusional state. Arthur's frustration is caused by his painful past and the harsh economic conditions he suffers from. This frustration makes way for the nihilistic delusions to take place and these lead to an inner crisis which ultimately ends with the emergence and takeover of Arthur's evil shadow, the Joker.

All in all, it can be concluded that within the psychological context of *Joker,* the nihilistic delusions are the cause whereas the supremacy of the shadow is the ultimate result. In turn, the main cause of the nihilistic delusions is Arthur's traumatic childhood. His abuse and maltreatment by his mother are what made Arthur Fleck. This is the main reason behind his nihilistic delusional condition and pseudobulbar attacks. In addition, the social layer mentioned in the background of the film is an external cause that facilitates the salvation of the purely evil and horrifying shadow called Joker. At the end of the film, the viewers have witnessed the transition from goodness to pure evil, from passive submissiveness to active dominance, from nihilistic delusions to the shadow and finally from the fragile and weak Arthur Fleck to the iconic figure of the Joker. As an origin story, *Joker* succeeds in portraying the motives behind the creation of the Joker as a villain in a realistic manner that causes the viewers to empathise with this character to finally acknowledge that he used to be as human as any other human being.

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