

Public Mask Versus Inner Darkness: An Analysis of Persona and Shadow in “Taxi Driver” (1976) Movie

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ABSTRACT

Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* (1976) exhibits increasingly unstable behavior marked by social withdrawal, moral obsession, and escalating violence, raising questions about the psychological forces behind his breakdown. This study examines the Persona and Shadow of Travis which influence his behavior and eventual breakdown. Although the film and Jungian theory have been widely discussed, Travis Bickle’s psychological development has not been systematically examined through the interaction of Carl Jung’s Persona and Shadow archetypes, resulting in a limited understanding of his inner conflict. This study employs a qualitative design using library research, with the film as primary data and scholarly works on Jungian psychology and film analysis as secondary sources. Data were collected through close and repeated viewing, focusing on key scenes, character behavior, and visual symbolism related to the Persona and Shadow, and analyzed descriptively through thematic categorization. The findings indicate that Travis’ Persona is reflected in his attempts to remain polite and socially functional, while his Shadow manifests as repressed anger and moral hostility. As social rejection and isolation intensify, the tension between these aspects leads to psychological instability and violence. This study demonstrates the usefulness of Jung’s archetypal theory in explaining psychological conflict and character development in film narratives.

Key words: Jungian Archetype; Persona; Shadow; Taxi Driver

INTRODUCTION

Literature and movies function as cultural texts that reflect human experience, particularly psychological conflict and social reality, through narrative and character representation. As a social institution, literature mirrors life by revealing both external social conditions and the inner psychological realities of individuals (Wellek & Warren, 1954), while literary texts communicate layered meanings and emotional depth through carefully crafted language (Castle, 2007). In a similar way, movies operate as an audio-visual literary form that conveys ideas, values, and psychological experiences through moving images and sound (Aryanti et al., 2022). Rather than serving merely as entertainment, movies communicate complex psychological and social meanings by presenting characters whose actions,

emotions, and inner struggles mirror real human conditions (Priyanti & Tustiawati, 2025; Sumarno, 2017). An observable empirical phenomenon is the sustained academic and public attention toward movies that portray alienation, loneliness, and psychological instability in urban settings, such as *Taxi Driver* (1976). This continued relevance indicates that the film resonates with ongoing social concerns about mental health, social isolation, and violence, making it a significant object of psychological analysis. Central to this phenomenon is the character of Travis Bickle, whose internal conflict is expressed through behavior, visual symbolism, and story progression, highlighting the need for a focused psychological approach to character analysis in movie studies.

Taxi Driver (1976) is a psychological crime drama movie directed by Martin Scorsese and released on February 8, 1976. The movie follows Travis Bickle, a lonely and mentally unstable Vietnam War veteran who works as a night-shift taxi driver in New York City. Plagued by insomnia, social alienation, and emotional disconnection, Travis becomes increasingly disturbed by the crime, prostitution, and moral decay he witnesses on the streets. His growing disgust with society leads him to construct a violent fantasy of “cleansing” the city. Travis attempts to connect with two women who represent very different aspects of his worldview: Betsy, a political campaign worker whom he idealizes, and Iris, a teenage prostitute whom he seeks to “save.” As his paranoia and frustration intensify, Travis purchases weapons, isolates himself, and prepares for violent confrontation, culminating in a brutal act of vigilante violence that forces audiences to question the boundary between justice and psychological breakdown IMDb (2025).

Martin Scorsese is an American director, producer, and screenwriter widely regarded as one of the most influential movie makers in cinematic history. His movies often explore themes of alienation, moral ambiguity, violence, and psychological conflict within antihero protagonists. Over the course of his career, Scorsese has directed a number of critically acclaimed movies such as “*Mean Streets*” (1973), “*Raging Bull*” (1980), “*Goodfellas*” (1990), “*The Departed*” (2006), and “*The Irishman*” (2019), many of which have earned major industry awards and shaped American cinematic style. *Taxi Driver* earned critical acclaim upon its release, receiving four Academy Award nominations including Best Picture, Best Actor, and Best Supporting Actress, and winning the Palme d’Or at the 1976 Cannes Film Festival (SparkNotes, 2025). Scorsese is known for his technical innovation, character-driven storytelling, and willingness to depict the darker sides of human psychology. His work has shaped modern narrative cinema and inspired generations of filmmakers, establishing him as a central figure in the study of movie as literary and cultural expression King & Ostberg (2024).

The archetypal approach is an analytical method used to interpret literary and film characters as representations of universal psychological patterns shared across humanity. As a literary approach, archetypal criticism emphasizes the interpretation of texts through universal symbols and cultural patterns and is generally understood as merging elements of historical and structural criticism (Alvina & Saragih, 2023,

as cited in Annisa et al., 2025). As noted by Guerin (2005), this perspective focuses on recurring forms that reveal common “motifs and character types” influencing how narratives are structured and how characters behave. In relation to this view, Carl Gustav Jung outlined three major classifications of archetypes: image archetypes, which are symbolic images found across cultures; archetypal patterns, which describe fundamental character structures and behavioral tendencies; and hero’s journey archetypes, which trace the stages typically faced by a protagonist. The category of archetypal patterns includes key psychic components such as the Persona, the outward mask individuals construct to gain social approval, and the Shadow, the concealed and often suppressed side of the personality. Together, these patterns illustrate the internal struggles individuals experience when balancing socially accepted identities with hidden aspects they attempt to deny or repress.

The present research applies Jung’s theory of the Persona and the Shadow to the character Travis Bickle in the movie *Taxi Driver* (1976). This study seeks to identify the public image Travis constructs in response to social interaction, cultural pressures, and the desire for normalcy, as well as the hidden aggression, paranoia, and violent desire for “purification” that shape his Shadow. By examining key moments where these two sides conflict with one another, this research aims to show how Travis’ decisions, psychological deterioration, and vigilante action emerge from the tension between the self he displays and the impulses he attempts to repress. Through this analysis, the study aims to show how Jung’s archetypes can clarify the ways alienation and psychological conflict are portrayed in movie characters, thereby contributing to existing research in this field.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous Related Study

Previous research on Jungian archetypes has examined how the Persona and the Shadow shape character development in different literary and cinematic works. Annisa et al. (2025) explore this theme in *The Song of Achilles*, showing that Achilles’ Persona is formed by cultural expectations of heroism and his mother’s hopes for his divine destiny. This outward image of strength conflicts with his hidden fears, emotional vulnerability, and deep attachment to Patroclus. Their study explains that the growing tension between his public image and his private feelings contributes to his emotional isolation and self-destructive choices, particularly after Patroclus’s death.

There is a research by Gunanda & Puspita (2022) on the character Kevin in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. The researchers argue that Kevin’s Persona functions as a mask that convinces others he is an ordinary and well-behaved child. Meanwhile, his Shadow contains hostility, emotional detachment, manipulation, and aggressiveness. The study shows that the contradiction between Kevin’s surface behavior and his hidden impulses becomes the driving force of the novel’s

psychological conflict. His inability to control or acknowledge the darker side of his personality eventually leads to extreme violence and the school massacre.

Another relevant study is conducted by Stefanus et al. (2020), who compare Toom in *Beautiful Boxer* with Kevin and Marcus in *White Chicks*. Their research identifies the presence of Persona, Shadow, and Anima in these characters and highlights the different ways each figure uses these archetypes. Toom's Persona as a disciplined Muay Thai fighter grows from cultural pressure and financial necessity, which forces him to hide his true feminine identity. This creates a long-term inner conflict between his public life and his personal identity. In contrast, Kevin and Marcus rely on exaggerated feminine Personas only during their undercover mission, and their Anima appears mainly in the behaviors they imitate to maintain their disguise. The researchers conclude that Toom's Persona represents deep identity suppression, while Kevin and Marcus use theirs temporarily as a professional strategy.

Jung's theory also appears in research on drama work. Özata (2021) studies Marina Carr's *Woman and Scarecrow* and identifies the Scarecrow as the representation of Woman's Shadow. The article explains that Scarecrow contains Woman's repressed desires, guilt, and unresolved emotional burdens that she has hidden throughout her life. Through a close reading of the play, the study shows that Scarecrow functions as a psychological mirror that forces Woman to confront the parts of herself she has long denied. Özata concludes that the play illustrates how the Shadow becomes unavoidable at moments of crisis and how self-confrontation is central to understanding identity and mortality.

Finally, Yuwananto et al. (2022) analyze Oba Yozo in *No Longer Human* and describe how his Persona and Shadow develop from childhood to adulthood. Yozo's Persona takes the form of a cheerful and obedient image that he uses to cope with his fear of human interaction and his desire to meet social and family expectations. As he grows older, however, his Shadow becomes more dominant, appearing in the form of anxiety, self-hatred, addiction, destructive behavior, and repeated suicide attempts. The study concludes that Yozo experiences an individuation crisis because he cannot balance the two sides of himself, which ultimately leads to psychological collapse and institutionalization.

Archetypal Approach

The archetypal approach is a way of reading literary works and films by viewing their characters, situations, and symbols as reflections of shared human experiences. It aims to uncover universal symbols, motifs, and character archetypes that transcend cultural and temporal boundaries, mirroring the core of the human condition (Annisa et al., 2025). This perspective draws attention to familiar motifs and character types that appear repeatedly across stories and cultures. It suggests that certain patterns in narrative are not accidental, but rooted in deeper structures of human thought and emotion as noted by Guerin (2005). Jung's framework

supports this idea by outlining several broad categories of archetypes that help explain why certain images and character roles feel universal and timeless.

Archetypal Patterns

Archetypal patterns refer to the basic character structures and recurring psychological tendencies found throughout myths, literature, and film (Guerin, 2005). They function as underlying templates that shape how characters behave and how stories unfold. In Jung's theory, these archetypal patterns often manifest in many forms, such as persona, anima and animus, shadow, and self (Diana et al., 2022). These components include the Persona, or the social mask people present to fit into their surroundings, and the Shadow, the hidden side of the self that contains impulses and feelings a person often avoids or suppresses. Through these patterns, it becomes possible to understand the deeper psychological forces that influence a character's actions and development.

Persona

The Persona in Jungian psychology refers to the carefully crafted social mask individuals present to meet external expectations and secure approval. As Hardanto et al. (2019) point out, the persona is a part of our unconscious that we develop to fit into society; it essentially acts as a barrier that keeps our true selves hidden. While this outward identity aligns with societal roles, the authentic self resides within the Shadow (Hardanto et al., 2019; Guerin, 2005). Because the shadow holds our genuine personality, which often goes against what society expects, it can lead to deep feelings of insecurity or the fear that our true side will be exposed. A strong cinematic example of the Persona appears in *Black Swan* (2010) through the character Nina Sayers. In one rehearsal sequence, Nina performs under the intense scrutiny of her director and fellow dancers. The studio, filled with mirrors and harsh lighting, visually embodies the constant pressure to maintain an immaculate facade. Throughout the scene, Nina's posture and controlled expressions reveal how she clings to a disciplined, innocent persona to match the perfect ballerina ideal. Even as she strains with anxiety, she forces herself to appear composed and flawless. This moment demonstrates the Persona archetype because Nina suppresses her fear of inadequacy and hides her emotional fragility, presenting instead a socially acceptable version of herself shaped by the expectations of the ballet world. Her behavior shows how individuals use the Persona as armor, projecting competence and control to navigate high-pressure environments.

Shadow

The Shadow in Jung's theory represents the unconscious and often darker aspects of the self such as impulses, desires, and traits that one represses because they conflict with personal morals or societal norms (Guerin, 2005). These unacknowledged elements continue to influence behavior and may surface during moments of psychological vulnerability. A compelling depiction of the Shadow

appears in “Fight Club” (1999). In one pivotal sequence, the narrator confronts Tyler Durden in a deserted parking lot, where the dim lighting and empty surroundings mirror the narrator’s plunge into the hidden recesses of his psyche. Tyler moves with confidence, aggression, and chaotic freedom, qualities the narrator has long suppressed in his attempt to live a controlled and consumer-driven life. The scene highlights the Shadow because Tyler embodies everything the narrator denies: rebellion, violence, and a desire to break free from societal constraints. As the confrontation escalates, the narrator realizes that Tyler is not a separate person but the manifestation of his own repressed self. This encounter visually and psychologically illustrates Jung’s concept of the Shadow, demonstrating how ignored or denied traits eventually surge to the surface, demanding recognition and integration for psychological wholeness.

METHOD

Design and Samples

This study employs a qualitative research design because the research problem concerns the interpretation of psychological meaning and archetypal representation rather than the measurement of numbers. The Persona and Shadow are internal psychological constructs that are expressed through character behavior, dialogue, and visual symbolism; therefore, they cannot be quantified or analyzed using statistical methods. A qualitative approach allows the researcher to examine how these archetypes are narratively constructed and psychologically developed within the film. Furthermore, the study aims to explain how and why Travis Bickle’s behavior and psychological breakdown emerge from the interaction between his Persona and Shadow, which requires close textual and visual analysis. As emphasized by Creswell and Creswell (2018), qualitative research is appropriate when the objective is to understand meaning, context, and interpretation derived from non-numerical data such as texts, images, and audiovisual materials. Thus, a qualitative design is the most suitable approach for addressing the research objectives of this study.

Instruments and Procedures

Data were collected using the library research method, with the movie *Taxi Driver* (1976) serving as the primary data and books, journal articles, and scholarly discussions on Jung’s archetypes and film analysis serving as secondary data. Data collection was conducted through close and repeated viewing of the movie, focusing on key scenes, character interactions, and visual symbolism to identify psychological patterns relevant to Jungian archetypes (Brummett, 2018). Scene selection followed a purposive sampling technique, in which scenes were included only if they clearly reflected the characteristics of Carl Jung’s Persona or Shadow archetypes. Scenes were categorized as Persona when they depicted Travis Bickle’s attempts to present a socially acceptable identity, such as displays of politeness, self-control, or conformity to social expectations. Conversely, scenes were

categorized as Shadow when they revealed suppressed aggression, hostility, paranoia, moral extremism, or violent impulses. All selected scenes, along with their time frames and archetypal classifications, were organized into a data unit table to ensure analytical transparency and replicability.

Data Analysis

The data analysis followed a descriptive qualitative approach conducted through several systematic steps. First, the data was categorized into two: Persona and Shadow. Second, each unit was examined using Carl Jung’s theory to identify indicators of the Persona and the Shadow. Third, the categorized data were compared across the narrative to identify patterns, contrasts, and shifts in the relationship between the Persona and the Shadow. Finally, the findings were interpreted and presented descriptively through thematic discussion, supported by selected scenes and relevant secondary literature, to demonstrate how Jungian archetypal elements emerge and transform throughout the film.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Data Units

| No | Archetype | Scene Description | Time Frame |
|----|-----------|---|-----------------|
| 1 | Persona | Travis’ polite interaction with Betsy | 21:41–22:02 |
| 2 | Persona | Travis presents himself as a moral helper to Iris | 1:21:02–1:22:20 |
| 3 | Shadow | Conversation with Palantine about “cleaning the city” | 29:17–30:02 |
| 4 | Shadow | Betsy’s rejection and Travis’ hostile reaction | 34:10–36:05 |
| 5 | Shadow | Mirror monologue and weapons rehearsal | 1:06:50–1:07:38 |
| 6 | Shadow | Brothel shootout | 1:33:40–1:43:00 |

Travis’ Persona

In Jungian psychology, the Persona functions as a social mask that enables individuals to appear acceptable and controlled within society while concealing inner conflict (Guerin, 2005). In *Taxi Driver*, Travis Bickle’s Persona is primarily expressed through his polite, restrained manner during social interactions, particularly in his roles as a taxi driver and as a romantic suitor. His calm speech, respectful tone, and compliance with social norms allow him to appear functional despite deep loneliness and alienation, illustrating the Persona’s role in facilitating social adaptation (Guerin, 2005).

This Persona is most clearly visible in Travis’ early interaction with Betsy. He approaches her politely and frames his invitation as a harmless desire for

companionship, presenting himself as sensitive and emotionally perceptive. By claiming that he understands her loneliness and offering “friendship,” Travis constructs an image of empathy and emotional maturity. From a Jungian perspective, this behavior reflects the Persona’s function in gaining social acceptance while masking psychological instability and inner dissatisfaction (Guerin, 2005). Similarly, Travis’ interactions with Iris reinforce this façade, as he adopts the role of a calm and morally concerned rescuer. His gentle language and insistence on “helping” her function as a socially acceptable justification for involvement in her life, further demonstrating how the Persona can legitimize questionable motivations.

However, Jung emphasizes that the Persona becomes problematic when it conceals unresolved inner conflict rather than mediating it (Guerin, 2005). Travis’ polite and compassionate appearance does not reflect genuine emotional connection but instead serves as a mask that legitimizes his growing sense of moral superiority. This gap between outward behavior and inner reality indicates that his Persona is fragile and increasingly disconnected from his true psychological condition.

Travis’ Shadow

The Shadow represents the repressed impulses, hostility, and desires that contradict the Persona and emerge when social control weakens (Jung, 1964; Guerin, 2005). In Travis Bickle, the Shadow manifests through intense disgust toward society, moral absolutism, and violent fantasies of purification. Unlike the controlled Persona, the Shadow is revealed most clearly through Travis’ language and actions when social boundaries are threatened.

A key manifestation of the Shadow appears in Travis’ conversation with political candidate Palantine, where he describes the city as “filth” and imagines it being “flushed” away. Although spoken calmly, this imagery reflects a violent desire for eradication rather than reform. According to Jungian theory, such dehumanizing language signals Shadow projection, in which inner hostility and repressed aggression are displaced onto the external world (Guerin, 2005). Travis’ moral disgust thus functions as a psychological justification for violence.

The Shadow intensifies following Betsy’s rejection, which destabilizes Travis’ Persona. Unable to tolerate emotional failure, he shifts rapidly from admiration to resentment, illustrating Jung’s assertion that threats to the Persona often trigger Shadow eruption (Guerin, 2005). His growing obsession with weapons, rehearsed confrontations, and mirror monologues further demonstrate the transition from repression to identification with the Shadow. At this stage, Travis no longer resists violent impulses but begins to define himself through them.

This identification culminates in the climactic acts of violence, where Travis reframes murder as moral duty. Jung explains that when individuals identify with the Shadow, destructive impulses become self-legitimizing rather than morally

questioned (Jung, 1964; Guerin, 2005). Travis' actions reflect this collapse of internal regulation, as violence becomes his primary means of asserting control and meaning.

Travis' Character Development

Travis Bickle's psychological trajectory is defined by the increasing imbalance between his Persona and Shadow. Initially, the Persona enables him to function socially despite isolation, but as his alienation deepens, the Shadow grows stronger and increasingly dominates his behavior. Rather than integrating these opposing aspects, Travis allows the Shadow to erupt uncontrollably, confirming Jung's view that psychological imbalance occurs when repression replaces self-awareness (Guerin, 2005). Jung's concept of individuation emphasizes the necessity of recognizing and integrating the Shadow to achieve psychological wholeness (Jung, 1964; Guerin, 2005). Travis' failure lies in his inability to reflect upon or acknowledge his destructive impulses. Instead, society's final validation of his violence reinforces the split within his psyche. His Persona is publicly restored, while the Shadow remains unresolved beneath the surface. The film's conclusion suggests repetition rather than resolution. Travis returns to his routine outwardly calm, yet psychologically unchanged. From a Jungian perspective, this ending confirms that Travis does not achieve individuation but remains trapped in a cycle of repression and eruption (Guerin, 2005). His breakdown is not a moment of transformation but evidence of an unresolved inner conflict that continues to define his identity.

The findings of this study show that Travis Bickle's Persona and Shadow change as the story progresses, which supports Jung's description of an unstable psychological structure. Travis' Persona appears in moments when he attempts to act politely, follow social norms, and maintain the appearance of someone who still wants connection. These moments are not merely a mask; they indicate that Travis continues to seek belonging in society despite his difficulty in understanding social interaction. However, the Shadow grows stronger as his isolation deepens. His disgust toward the city, his anger, his moral pressure to "clean" what he considers corrupted, and his fixation on violence demonstrate that the Shadow gradually overpowers the Persona. This progression explains why Travis does not suddenly become violent; rather, his extreme behavior emerges from a prolonged internal struggle between opposing psychological forces.

Despite the extensive scholarly attention given to *Taxi Driver* and Jungian archetypal theory, no previous study has systematically examined Travis Bickle's psychological development through the dynamic interaction of Carl Jung's Persona and Shadow archetypes. As a result, Travis' internal psychological conflict has often been discussed in fragmented or thematic terms rather than as an evolving archetypal process. By focusing explicitly on the shifting balance between Persona and Shadow, the present study addresses this gap and offers a more integrated understanding of Travis' psychological breakdown.

These findings share both similarities and differences with earlier studies that apply Jungian archetypes to literary and film characters. Annisa et al. (2025) explain that Achilles's Persona is shaped by cultural expectations and the pressure to fulfill a heroic destiny, while his Shadow contains fear, emotional vulnerability, and inner conflict. This is comparable to Travis' struggle, as both characters experience tension between the identity they attempt to maintain and the impulses they fail to control. However, the source of their conflict differs significantly: Achilles's Shadow intensifies following profound personal loss, whereas Travis' Shadow develops gradually through prolonged isolation and social alienation.

A similar pattern of concealed aggression is observed in the study by Gunanda and Puspita (2022), who found that Kevin in *We Need to Talk About Kevin* hides violent impulses behind a calm and socially acceptable Persona. This parallels Travis' use of politeness to mask psychological turmoil. Nevertheless, a key difference lies in the developmental trajectory of the Shadow. Kevin's destructive tendencies emerge early in life, while Travis' Shadow evolves progressively during adulthood as a response to sustained social disconnection.

Broader applications of Jungian archetypes can be seen in the work of Stefanus et al. (2020), who identified Persona, Shadow, and Anima in the characterization of Toom, Kevin, and Marcus. While their study similarly employs Jungian theory, the present research diverges in emphasis. Toom, Kevin, and Marcus primarily use their Personas as strategic or situational disguises, whereas Travis maintains his Persona because he continues to seek social acceptance rather than mere manipulation. This distinction underscores Travis' unresolved desire for belonging. Related insights are also offered by Özata (2021), who demonstrated that the Scarecrow in *Woman and Scarecrow* functions as a manifestation of the Shadow that compels Woman to confront suppressed emotions. This finding aligns with the present study, as Travis' Shadow likewise forces repressed impulses to surface. However, Özata's analysis centers on symbolic interaction in dramatic literature, while this research focuses on psychological conflict as depicted through cinematic narrative and character development.

Finally, Yuwananto et al. (2017) described how Yozo in *No Longer Human* fails to balance a cheerful Persona with a destructive Shadow. Travis exhibits a comparable imbalance; however, the expression of conflict differs markedly. Yozo internalizes his psychological struggle, directing it inward, whereas Travis externalizes his conflict through acts of violence. Taken together, these comparisons demonstrate that although Persona–Shadow imbalance is a recurring motif in literary and film studies, Travis Bickle's psychological breakdown is distinctive in its gradual escalation and outward manifestation of violence, thereby reinforcing the specific contribution of this study.

CONCLUSION

The study shows that Travis Bickle's psychological conflict develops from the ongoing tension between the Persona he tries to maintain and the Shadow he struggles to control. His efforts to appear calm, polite, and socially functional gradually give way as his loneliness and frustration deepen, allowing the darker side of his character to take over. Travis' final actions are not sudden or inexplicable but the result of this slow inner shift. By examining these changes, the study offers a clearer picture of how Jung's archetypes help explain Travis' behavior throughout the movie. Academically, this research contributes to film and literary studies by providing a focused Jungian analysis that clarifies how the interaction between Persona and Shadow shapes psychological development in cinematic characters, thereby enriching the application of archetypal theory in film analysis. Even so, this research is limited to the Persona and Shadow and focuses solely on Travis, leaving other archetypes and characters unexamined. Future work can build on this by exploring additional archetypal elements or comparing Travis with similar antihero figures to gain a broader understanding of psychological conflict in movie narratives.

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