

OPPENHEIMER (2023) BIOPIC: PERFORMING ACTING OUT, SEEKING WORKING THROUGH

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Abstract

Mental health and trauma now dominate social discourse as well as contemporary cinema, reflecting a growing collective awareness of post-war historical wounds. This study examines the representation of J. Robert Oppenheimer's traumatic experiences in the film *Oppenheimer* (2023) and assesses how that cinematic narrative aligns with selected biographical records. The analysis draws on Cathy Caruth's concepts of belatedness and repetition compulsion and is complemented by Dominick LaCapra's distinction between *acting out* and *working through*. Using a biographical approach, trauma-related moments identified in the film script are juxtaposed with historical documents in *Robert Oppenheimer, Letters and Recollections*. The findings identify 59 trauma-related instances: 32 cases (54%) reflect *acting out*, while 27 cases (46%) reflect *working through*. In the film, trauma is primarily conveyed through psychological disturbances and the intrusion of subconscious memories. In contrast, the biographical documents portray a more structured and sustained pattern of reconciliation, in which *working through* appears more dominant.

Keywords: *trauma studies; Oppenheimer; Acting Out; Working Through; Biography approach*

INTRODUCTION

Mental health and trauma have become increasingly prominent in academic and public discussion, reflecting a growing awareness of psychological well-being and the lasting effects of violence, conflict and crisis. This concern is also visible in contemporary culture, especially in literature and cinema, where traumatic experiences are often revisited through stories of memory, suffering, and unresolved loss (Belau, 2021). Recent scholarship has shown that trauma studies are closely linked to cultural memory studies, particularly in explaining how painful histories continue to be represented in the present (Kennedy, 2020). Film likewise remains an important medium through which societies reconstruct and interpret the past (Rosenstone, 2023). Trauma, therefore, should be

understood not only as an individual psychological condition, but also as a cultural and social issue that shapes collective understandings of historical suffering.

The growing contemporary interest in trauma is closely tied to the legacy of major historical events that continue to shape collective memory. One of the most memorable events is World War II, which is one of the most influential events in modern history because it left historical wounds that have been passed down across generations. Its impact continues to be present through various cultural mediums such as literature, art, and film (Kortti, 2022). Among these media, film plays a crucial role due to its ability to dramatically reconstruct history in order to shape public memory (Rosenstone, 2023b). Through the power of its representation, film not only functions as entertainment, but also as a space for social reflection that shows how traumatic experiences are passed down and interpreted across generations (Bordwell et al., 2020). Films such as *The World Will Tremble* (2025), *White Bird* (2025), and *Prisoner of War* (2025) show that the narrative of World War II trauma is still relevant to explore today.

In the development of modern cinema, film biographies or biopics occupy a strategic position because they combine historical facts and artistic interpretations to present the lives of figures in an emotional and profound way, thus becoming a visual medium capable of mediating traumatic experiences in a way that is often unattainable through verbal language (Alfianti, 2024; Ebbrecht-Hartmann, 2021). This kind of representation requires a theoretical framework that can explain how extreme events are experienced and remembered. On that basis, Cathy Caruth's (1996) thinking becomes an important foundation, especially her view that trauma is an experience that so exceeds psychological capacity that it cannot be processed directly at the time of the event. This perspective is enriched by Dominick LaCapra's (2001) idea, which emphasizes that trauma not only leaves deep wounds at the individual level, but is also embedded in collective memory and shapes the way a society understands the past. These two frameworks form the analytical basis for interpreting how the film *Oppenheimer* presents moral trauma as a layered, fragmented experience that continues to work in the characters' memories and in a broader historical context.

This theoretical framework is relevant when applied to Christopher Nolan's film *Oppenheimer* (2023). The film is an adaptation of the biography *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (2005) by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin, presenting an in-depth portrayal of J. Robert Oppenheimer's intellectual journey as a theoretical physicist. The film specifically traces his involvement in the Manhattan Project, a secret research and development program led by the United States during World War II with the sole purpose of creating the world's first nuclear weapon. Through his leadership at the Los Alamos laboratory, Oppenheimer's position became crucial in uniting scientific innovation and military strategy, which later led to him being called the "father of the atomic bomb" (Shanumugam, 2023). The film constructs the interrelationship between technical achievements, the ethical dilemmas of nuclear weapons development, and

geopolitical power dynamics through a complex narrative that includes visualizations of postwar security (Fabian et al., 2024).

Previous research shows that *Oppenheimer* (2023) represents trauma through various analytical frameworks. Faux (2024) places this film in a popular cultural discourse that frames nuclear issues through symbolism and scientific myths. From an ethical perspective, Malik (2025) criticizes the film's tendency to glorify Oppenheimer as a tragic hero, while the suffering of atomic bomb victims and the moral responsibility of scientists are ignored. Furthermore, Yildiztasi and Avcu (2025), through their study of the Canaanite side, assert that trauma is an existential experience that can be processed through reflection and language, providing an important theoretical foundation for the analysis of trauma in the film *Oppenheimer* (2023).

This study applies Cathy Caruth's (1996) trauma theory to examine unassimilated experience and the recurrence of fragmented memory in *Oppenheimer* (2023). It is further supported by Dominick LaCapra's (2001) distinction between *acting out* and *working through*, which clarifies how trauma may remain repetitive or shift toward reflective engagement. Finally, a biographical approach is used to read the film's narrative alongside documented events in J. Robert Oppenheimer's life, enabling an assessment of how creative adaptation intersects with historical record (Guerin, 2005). Taken together, these lenses allow this study to investigate how trauma is constructed and mediated in cinematic form while remaining attentive to the ethical and historical implications attached to Oppenheimer's role.

Based on this framework, this study addresses two research questions: (1) How does *Oppenheimer* (2023), as a creative adaptation, represent J. Robert Oppenheimer's movement between *acting out* and *working through*? (2) How do these representations align with Oppenheimer's biographical experiences as documented in historical records? Although previous studies have contributed to discussions of trauma, ethics, and ideology in film and literary studies, research that integrates Caruth's and LaCapra's trauma theories with a biographical approach to analyze *Oppenheimer* (2023) remains limited. Therefore, this study addresses that gap by examining how the film's trauma narrative corresponds to, departs from, or reshapes the traumatic and ethical conflicts recorded in Oppenheimer's letters and recollections, thereby enriching scholarship on trauma representation, cultural memory, and biographical interpretation in contemporary cinema.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study on psychological representation in biographical cinema is based on a trauma study framework that integrates analysis of internal memory mechanisms and subjects' emotional responses. To examine these dimensions, this study refers extensively to the ideas of Caruth (1996) and LaCapra (2001). Based on Caruth's (1996) framework, trauma is understood not as an instantaneous event that is immediately processed, but rather through the mechanisms of delayed trauma or delayed awareness, as well as

repetition compulsion, in which trauma manifests itself again through nightmares or emotional flashbacks. Caruth's (1996) idea is key to analyzing the mental reaction of the character Oppenheimer to the atomic bomb he created, where the full moral consequences are only psychologically responded to after total destruction occurs, which he then experiences as inner turmoil and deep regret through flashback narratives in the film *Oppenheimer* (2023).

To complement the understanding of the subject's response process, LaCapra (2001) provides a critical distinction regarding how individuals react to trauma through two main pathways: acting out and working through. In LaCapra's (2001) concept, acting out traps individuals in a condition where they continuously repeat traumatic events without reaching their true meaning, while through working through, subjects reflectively face their experiences until they are able to overcome them and gain understanding. The narrative in this film shows how the character transforms from acting out behavior to the emotional process of working through as defined by LaCapra (2001) that a transition from defense mechanisms and denial to honest moral recognition, which ultimately triggers an internal struggle over the destructive role he has taken in history.

Scholars have scrutinized Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer* (2023) from diverse perspectives, including semiotics, psychoanalysis, ideological criticism, and historical-biographical approaches. Yulianti (2024) employs Barthesian semiotics to demonstrate how the interplay of lighting, color, and facial expressions consistently constructs the scientist's moral conflict, while linguistic elements reinforce themes of social responsibility. Hutabarat and Hasbi (2025), applying Freudian psychoanalysis, identify the manifestation of id-ego-superego tensions within Oppenheimer's compulsive behavior and anxiety, positioning the protagonist as a subject defined by moral dissonance. Abbas (2023) posits that the film situates Oppenheimer within the power structures of military capitalism, suggesting his moral turmoil is rooted in state ideological relations. Furthermore, Mason (2024) asserts that the revocation of Oppenheimer's security clearance was driven by Cold War political dynamics, illustrating how political manipulation results in alienation and trauma.

Meanwhile, Hanitianingrum and Ribawati (2024) highlight the tension between scientific idealism and moral guilt concerning the Manhattan Project. Moulin (2016) argues that the film can be interpreted as a partial biography that unveils existential dimensions through visual symbolism. Drawing on Caruth's notion of trauma as an experience of belatedness, Nyfors (2025) demonstrates that trauma can manifest somatically, as reflected in Arthur Fleck's body, which displays dissociation caused by social rejection. Furthermore, Sonat (2025) utilizes LaCapra's framework to interpret the communal rituals in *Midsommar* as a form of collective catharsis that processes trauma through performativity and bodily expression. Collectively, these are relevant as they demonstrate that trauma in film can manifest across individual, somatic, and collective dimensions, which provide a comparative framework for analyzing how Oppenheimer

represents trauma through both internal psychological disturbances and external social pressures.

Overall, previous scholarship has examined the film through the lenses of ethics, ideology, and psychology, demonstrating diverse applications of trauma theory. However, there remains a significant gap in research that integrates the theoretical frameworks of Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra with a biographical approach to analyze the moral and historical trauma of the scientist as a historical agent. This study addresses that lacuna by analyzing the representation of J. Robert Oppenheimer's experiences of acting out and working through. Furthermore, it explores how such representations align with biographical accounts of his guilt, ethical struggles, and the historical burden resulting from his pivotal role in the development of the atomic bomb.

METHOD

To address the objectives of this study, a biographical approach is employed to examine how J. Robert Oppenheimer's trauma and inner conflict are represented in the film *Oppenheimer (2023)*. This approach is selected because it enables a comprehensive analysis that integrates the character's cinematic portrayal with documented aspects of Oppenheimer's personal experiences and the broader historical circumstances that shaped his life. Through this framework, the study does not limit its focus to the filmic elements alone, but also considers the lived realities that inform the narrative construction and thematic representation of trauma. Such an approach ensures that the interpretation of the film remains grounded in verifiable historical material while allowing a focused examination of how creative adaptation interacts with biographical truth.

The data sources are divided into two types. The primary data comes from the script of the film *Oppenheimer (2023)* written by Christopher Nolan, specifically the pink revision version dated October 4, 2022, which was accessed through the online archive The Internet Movie Script Database (IMSDB). This script is the main data for examining how the scenes, dialogue, and story structure build a picture of the character's trauma. Secondary data is obtained from *Robert Oppenheimer, Letters and Recollections (1980)* by Julius Robert Oppenheimer, which contains a collection of letters and memories about Oppenheimer. This book is used as a basis for comparison to see the extent to which the film's representation reflects Oppenheimer's documented life experiences.

The analysis process was carried out in several steps. First, the researcher traced important scenes in the film that showed traces of trauma, emotional pressure, and moral dilemmas that he faced. Second, the researcher identified historical and biographical information relevant to Oppenheimer's life, particularly during the period when he led the Manhattan Project. Third, the film data was compared with biographical sources to identify points of convergence, differences, and the way the film reconstructs historical events through cinematic language.

Thematic-interpretive analysis was used to interpret these findings. Themes were developed with reference to Cathy Caruth's (1996) and Dominick LaCapra's (2001)

theories of trauma, particularly concepts such as belatedness, unclaimed experience, repetition compulsion, acting out, and working through, which help to understand how trauma emerges and is processed in the narrative. This analysis also highlights how the film builds tension between personal trauma and broader historical trauma.

The entire synthesis process was carried out to produce a comprehensive understanding of how the film *Oppenheimer* constructs the traumatic experiences of its main character. By connecting the film's representations and historical records, this study attempts to show how *Oppenheimer*'s trauma is not only a narrative element, but also an important part of how the film reinterprets history. The credibility of the analysis is maintained by referring to reliable biographical sources and using a framework of trauma theory that is recognized in academic studies.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis of the film *Oppenheimer* (2023) is categorized into two main parts to map the representation of psychological trauma and assess the extent to which film corresponds with available biographical documentation. Using the script of the film *Oppenheimer* (2023) as primary data, trauma identification is carried out qualitatively to dissect the manifestations of inner turmoil experienced by the main character. These findings are then compared with biographical records to determine the extent to which Christopher Nolan's cinematic narrative maintains the legitimacy of historical facts or dramatizes them for the sake of visual aesthetics.

The film *Oppenheimer* (2023), which is both a creative adaptation and a biography of J. Robert Oppenheimer, depicts the emotional burden and trauma that arose from his involvement in the Manhattan Project. Through its visual style and storytelling, the film shows how trauma works in Oppenheimer's mind, not as an immediate reaction, but as an awareness that comes long after the major event, as explained by Caruth (1996). This study found 59 main data points that reinforce this description, where all data are grouped based on how trauma is depicted in the script of the film *Oppenheimer* (2023), thus providing a clearer understanding of the forms of traumatic experiences experienced by the character Oppenheimer throughout the storyline.

Belatedness in Oppenheimer

The analysis was then narrowed down by considering the characteristics of trauma based on Caruth's (1996) theory, namely belatedness, the delayed awareness of trauma, and repetition compulsion, which is the experience that reappears repeatedly even though one wants to forget it (Caruth, 1996). Analysis of the main data shows two main patterns: first, the emergence of memories due to internal pressure, and second, memories triggered by external pressure, where public pressure forces Oppenheimer to renegotiate his past experiences.

The first pattern is presented when Oppenheimer's inner visualization appears without any conversational context. This is captured in the script description: "*A VAST SPHERE OF FIRE, the fire of a thousand suns, slowly eats the night-time desert. A line of black type appears.*" (Nolan, 2022). Because the image emerges in the opening scene—before Oppenheimer interacts with other characters—it functions as an internally generated return rather than a response to immediate external pressure. The fireball operates as a symbolic intrusion that signals trauma already embedded in his subconscious. In other words, the past remains active within his present consciousness, surfacing spontaneously as an unresolved psychological burden.

This internally generated pattern is developed further during AEC hearing, where trauma is activated not by direct questioning, but by symbolic visual cues. The script notes, "*INT. ROOM 2022, ATOMIC ENERGY COMMISSION - DAY 130. Alone on the couch, I glance up, NERVOUS, as a man in uniform walks past. As he sits, I study the back of his head.*" (Nolan, 2022). In this scene, Oppenheimer is sitting in the hearing room and suddenly shows anxiety just because he sees a man in uniform walk past and sit in front of him. There is no interrogation or verbal pressure that triggers his reaction, but his anxious gaze and restless behavior indicate that memories of when he was preparing the Manhattan Project suddenly haunt him again. An anxious reaction to a person in uniform suggests that trauma is not always triggered by a real threat, but can arise through symbols that remind the character of their past. In this context, the uniform serves as a trigger for associations with institutional pressure and wartime experiences.

While the previous scene portrays trauma arising from internal pressure and symbolic reminders, the second pattern demonstrates how external confrontation forces buried memory to return. This is evident when Robb presses Oppenheimer during the AEC meeting. "*Were you happier there than in America? [INSERT CUT: A YOUNG ME (TWENTY-ONE) LIES IN BED STARING UP, CRYING... PARTICLES WITH THE VASTNESS OF THE STARS MOVE LIKE FIREFLIES..].*" (Nolan, 2022). The flashbacks experienced by the character Oppenheimer do not appear as spontaneous psychological reactions, but rather as direct responses to the pressure of interrogation he experiences. The trial situation forces the character Oppenheimer to reopen past experiences that he was previously unable to fully understand. In this desperate situation, traumatic memories that had been hidden reappear and disturb his concentration, as if demanding to be acknowledged. Robb's interrogation forced Oppenheimer to confront phases of his life that had previously been buried in his memory. The flashback that emerged revealed that this verbal pressure reopened emotional conflicts that had never been fully processed. Thus, the flashbacks that surfaced during the interrogation were not merely part of the narrative, but also serve as an indicator of how trauma operates in a delayed manner and disrupts the character's consciousness.

This externally triggered return becomes even more explicit when Robb questions Oppenheimer about Hiroshima. As Oppenheimer begins to answer collectively by stating, "*We set forth our-*", Robb immediately interrupts him by saying, "*I'm asking you about it, not*

'we'.", thereby forcing Oppenheimer to acknowledge personal responsibility through his reply, "I presented arguments against abandoning it. But I did not endorse them." (Nolan, 2022). In this dialogue, when Oppenheimer tries to answer from a collective point of view, Robb immediately cuts him off and demands individual accountability. Robb's insistence causes Oppenheimer to assert himself individually as "I", bringing forth a moral awareness that he had not previously been aware of. The moment when he says "I set forth arguments..." (Nolan 2022), marks that the memory and assessment of his past actions only truly emerged when he was forced to face them directly. The shift from collective responses to personal statements marked a significant change in Oppenheimer's moral consciousness. At this point, he no longer hid behind shared responsibility but began to confront his personal involvement head-on (Caruth, 1996).

Taken together, the scenes above suggest two recurring trauma triggers in the film. First, internally generated images—such as the fireball that appears before Oppenheimer engages with other characters—imply that traumatic experience has been integrated into his psychological structure and can operate without an immediate situational cue. This internalized trauma persistently shapes how he interprets events and judges moral responsibility. Second, external pressures—especially courtroom and interrogation contexts—can also elicit traumatic returns, but these reactions depend more strongly on the immediate situation. Overall, Caruth's (1996) concept of belatedness is reflected in how the film depicts trauma as both persistent (internally driven) and episodically reactivated (externally triggered), with the former appearing to exert deeper, more continuous influence on Oppenheimer's consciousness.

Repetition Compulsion in Oppenheimer (2023)

Beyond belated return, Oppenheimer's trauma is also represented through repetition compulsion, in which sensory fragments recur and overwhelm perception (Caruth, 1996). One of the clearest examples appears when Oppenheimer moves through the crowd at Fuller Lodge, Los Alamos. The script records his monologue and the intrusive sound: "As I walk past the rear bleachers I get a close view of ... DOZENS OF FEET STAMPING IN UNISON... the STAMPING FEET GET FASTER as I approach the stage... The STAMPING GROWS OPPRESSIVE—FASTER and FASTER until..." (Nolan, 2022). Across the film, variations of this stamping sound recur repeatedly, turning an ordinary crowd noise into a compulsive traumatic return. The repetition does not signal a present physical threat; instead, it forces Oppenheimer to relive the pressure and guilt associated with his past, until the sensory intrusion disrupts his ability to remain grounded in the present.

Repetition compulsion also appears during the victory speech after the bombing of Japan. As the script indicates, Oppenheimer hallucinates: "DRIFTING through... I see a young man sitting, back to the wall, WEEPING, a woman trying to console him... As I exit, CELEBRATORS RUN PAST, JOYFUL... turning, I see a young physicist at the wall, bent double... As I pass, he looks up, DISTRAUGHT, VOMITING AROUND HIS MOUTH. FADE

OUT.” (Nolan, 2022). These fragmented visions sharply contrast public triumph with private moral collapse. Even in a moment of collective celebration, guilt repeatedly interrupts Oppenheimer’s ability to participate in the present. The film therefore frames trauma as an experience that repeatedly intrudes through sound, hallucination, and symbolic return—showing how the past remains active within the present rather than being fully concluded. This pattern of involuntary return also prepares the ground for LaCapra’s (2001) distinction between *acting out* (being trapped in repetition) and *working through* (moving toward reflective engagement).

Trauma Reconciliation: Acting Out and Working Through

Building on Caruth’s account of belatedness and repetition, the character’s responses can be further interpreted through LaCapra’s (2001) two-part model of trauma reconciliation: *acting out* and *working through*. In the *acting out* phase, the subject remains caught in compulsive repetition and experiences the traumatic past as if it were still present. In this study, 32 of the 59 identified instances fall into this category, suggesting that the film largely depicts Oppenheimer as trapped in unresolved repetition. To indicate intensity across scenes, a 1–5 scale is used (1 = mild, 5 = severe). The distribution and patterns of *acting out* are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Analysis of Acting Out in Oppenheimer (2023)

Scene	Life stage	Rate
Oppenheimer sat in the witness chair, his body tense, his eyes tightly closed at the AEC hearing	Adulthood	3
Oppenheimer's reaction recalled his youth when asked by Rob about his loyalty to the US.	Adulthood	2
Jean Tatlock's shadow in the courtroom	Adulthood	2
Oppenheimer shook his head violently to dispel the memory of Jean; an uncontrollable physical reaction.	Adulthood	2
The image of Jean drowning suddenly appeared, irrelevant to the question.	Young adulthood	2
The sound of the crowd's footsteps turned into an annoying echo before the victory speech.	Young adulthood	1
Oppenheimer reaction of closing his eyes and shaking his head when hearing stories about the previous war.	Young adulthood	3
Holding the phone when she heard the news of the bombing of Hiroshima.	Young adulthood	2
Oppenheimer's portrayal of cheers turning into the sound of explosions during the victory speech.	Young adulthood	1
The cheers around him suddenly disappeared, and Oppenheimer focused on his own breathing.	Young adulthood	1
The noise became a mechanical sound that disturbed Oppenheimer.	Young adulthood	2
Oppenheimer sees the audience melting like they're burning, a hallucination caused by guilt.	Young adulthood	1
Oppenheimer saw charred corpses where people had stood; images of terror emerged in the middle of his speech.	Young adulthood	1

Oppenheimer saw a young man crying, leaning against the wall in front of the hall.	Young adulthood	1
Oppenheimer hallucinated seeing a physicist vomiting and looked at him in despair.	Young adulthood	1
Oppenheimer's fear of the bomb discovery led him to deny it.	Young adulthood	4
Oppenheimer's confession, as if he always had blood on his hands when standing before the president.	Young adulthood	1
Oppenheimer's refusal when he was about to be labeled as someone who had a great influence on the atomic policies of the USA	Young adulthood	2
Oppenheimer's statement that he loved his country while appearing to be under great pressure	Adulthood	2
Oppenheimer hears the sound of past stamping as Robb asks that Oppenheimer serve as an assistant in selecting the bomb's target	Adulthood	2
The sound of stamping that came to Oppenheimer's mind when Robb asked about the number of bomb victims.	Adulthood	3
Oppenheimer's admission that his moral scruples were troubled after the bombing.	Adulthood	2
The sound of stamping attacks Oppenheimer again as he admits he helped end the war.	Adulthood	3
The stamping sound attacked Oppenheimer as he recalled his testimony in court.	Adulthood	3
Oppenheimer's increasingly chaotic thoughts when answering Rob's question about making another bomb	Adulthood	3
Oppenheimer experiences a blinding light hallucination as he answers that he will continue working as usual in the laboratory	Adulthood	3
Oppenheimer's hallucination of light entering through cracks in the room while discussing hydrogen bombs	Adulthood	2
hallucination The light grows stronger when discussing atomic bombs	Adulthood	3
The light and sound stop	Adulthood	2
Opens eyes, heavy breathing, exhausted	Adulthood	1

As shown in table 1, three dominant patterns emerge from Oppenheimer's acting out responses. First, most instances occur during his adult life, particularly during the AEC hearing scene, suggesting that trauma intensifies when he faces retrospective political judgment. Second, the most frequent manifestations involve bodily tension and sensor intrusion, such as shaking, heavy breathing, and hearing stamping sound, indicating trauma returns through involuntary physical reaction rather than conscious recollection. Third, the highest-rated cases are commonly associated with discussions of bomb responsibility and moral consequences, showing that ethical accountability functions as a major trigger of traumatic repetition.

Overall, the *acting out* instances identified in the script indicate that Oppenheimer's trauma is frequently expressed through involuntary bodily reactions—tension, shaking, disrupted breathing, and sensory intrusion. These responses suggest that the character

repeatedly collapses the boundary between past and present, which is consistent with LaCapra's (2001) description of *acting out* as being trapped in a cycle of repetition that resists narrative integration and reflective distance.

In the description of the opening scene, "*FACE. Gaunt, tense... The face SHUDDERS*" (Nolan, 2022), his body reacts before his mind has time to understand, showing how traumatic experiences return as spontaneous tension that he cannot suppress. This pressure becomes even clearer in the description "*DOZENS OF FEET STAMPING... FASTER AND FASTER... I JAM my eyes CLOSED*" (Nolan, 2022) when sensory memories of increasingly loud and rapid footsteps create an onslaught that causes him to lose control of his mental space. These two findings reinforce the picture that trauma for Oppenheimer is not just a memory that surfaces occasionally, but a recurring and oppressive physical experience that continues to intrude into his consciousness and disrupt his emotional stability.

These forms of *acting out* show that Oppenheimer remains bound to traumatic patterns that are difficult to regulate. However, LaCapra (2001) emphasizes that reconciliation does not necessarily end in repetition. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001), he argues that subjects may move toward *working through*, a stage in which trauma begins to be confronted more consciously and critically. While *acting out* dominates this study's dataset (32 of 59 instances), the remaining 27 instances indicate moments of *working through*. To observe this shift, Table 2 applies the same 1–5 intensity scale to summarize patterns of *working through* in the film.

Table 2. Analysis of Working Through in Oppenheimer (2023)

Scene	Life stage	Rate
Oppenheimer accepts Strauss's question and accepts the reality that times have changed	Adulthood	1
Oppenheimer opened his eyes after the sound stopped, looked at the camera, marking his full awareness of the present moment.	Adulthood	2
Oppenheimer smiled casually when offered a prestigious position, showing that the trauma no longer haunted him.	Adulthood	2
Oppenheimer smiled as he calmly recounted his past, answering serious questions without interruption.	Adulthood	2
Oppenheimer explained his views on neutrality policy calmly and reflectively.	Adulthood	2
Oppenheimer attended the congress four years after the bombing, demonstrating the process of accepting trauma.	Adulthood	2
Oppenheimer responds to Strauss: "For the world," demonstrating broad moral awareness.	Adulthood	3
Oppenheimer acknowledges: "We bombed an enemy that was essentially defeated," a moral reflection on past actions.	Adulthood	3
Oppenheimer rejected the Hydrogen Bomb project, demonstrating a sense of moral responsibility that had been processed.	Adulthood	3

Oppenheimer emphasized the importance of deep concern for the world, transforming trauma into ethical awareness.	Adulthood	3
Oppenheimer chronologically organizes his experiences, presenting a rational narrative of the past.	Adulthood	2
Oppenheimer consciously acknowledges his past to Strauss without being emotionally disturbed.	Adulthood	2
Oppenheimer accepted the changing times and moral responsibility: "Times change, Mr. Strauss."	Adulthood	2
Oppenheimer responded to the job offer calmly and methodically; trauma did not control his actions.	Adulthood	2
Oppenheimer answered sensitive questions calmly and objectively, demonstrating reflective distance.	Adulthood	2
Oppenheimer reflects on changing political views without repeated emotional reactions.	Adulthood	2
Oppenheimer states past involvement objectively, showing emotional distance from the trauma.	Adulthood	2
Oppenheimer used everyday analogies to discuss nuclear weapons, demonstrating rational reflection.	Adulthood	2
Oppenheimer consciously acknowledged the "blood on my hands," marking a moral recognition of trauma.	Adulthood	3
Oppenheimer felt guilty for the world, demonstrating broad moral reflection rather than a spontaneous emotional reaction.	Adulthood	3
Oppenheimer acknowledges his foolishness in the Chevalier case, stops "replaying the trauma" and begins to be honest.	Adulthood	3
Oppenheimer explains the danger of mutual destruction between nations, demonstrating rational reflection on global risks.	Adulthood	3
Oppenheimer recognized the morality of using the bomb, reflecting on collective violence.	Adulthood	3
Oppenheimer emphasized human unity to stop nuclear war, sublimating trauma into ethical responsibility.	Adulthood	3
Oppenheimer rejected academic neutrality regarding the Hydrogen Bomb, demonstrating ethical and reflective awareness.	Adulthood	3
Oppenheimer acknowledged moral scruples: "Terrible ones," marking an ethical recognition of trauma.	Adulthood	3
Oppenheimer recognizes historical consequences: "I believe we did," trauma integrated into moral consciousness.	Adulthood	3
Oppenheimer responds to Kitty: "We'll see," showing that the trauma is still internal, the reflection incomplete.	Adulthood	2

Drawing on Table 2, three tendencies characterize Oppenheimer's movement toward *working through*. First, all identified cases occur during adulthood, suggesting that reflective processing develops only after the immediate wartime period has passed. Second, many entries involve calm speech, organized narration, and measured responses, indicating increased emotional distance from traumatic memory. Third, the highest-rated examples consistently concern guilt, responsibility, and global danger, implying that

trauma is gradually transformed into ethical awareness rather than remaining a repetitive disturbance. Taken together, these findings align with LaCapra's (2001) notion of *working through*, in which trauma begins to be critically processed rather than compulsively repeated.

This transformation is most clearly marked by two moral acknowledgments in the film's later sections. Oppenheimer's statement to President Truman, "*I feel that I have blood on my hands*" (Nolan, 2022), signals a shift from involuntary suffering to the reflective ability to name personal guilt. The process becomes more expansive in the closing dialogue with Einstein, when Oppenheimer states, "*I believe we did*" (Nolan, 2022), acknowledging that the Manhattan Project opened the possibility of global destruction. If the first confession registers personal moral injury, the second reframes that injury as historical and collective responsibility. Together, these moments suggest that Oppenheimer is no longer solely trapped in *acting out*, but is beginning to *work through* trauma by interpreting it and integrating its ethical consequences.

This process reaches its strongest point in the closing dialogue with Einstein, when Oppenheimer states, "*I believe we did*" (Nolan, 2022), acknowledging that the Bom Project, or what everyone know as Manhattan project had opened the possibility of global destruction. If the first confession reflects recognition of personal moral injury, the second expands that awareness into a broader historical consciousness. These two moments indicate that Oppenheimer is no longer trapped in acting out, but has entered the stage of working through, where trauma is faced, interpreted, and integrated into an understanding of its ethical consequences.

Overall, the 59 trauma-related data points identified in the *Oppenheimer* (2023) script indicate that the character is depicted more often in *acting out* than in *working through*. Most scenes emphasize sudden flashbacks, physical disturbance, and repetitive sensory intrusion, suggesting that the past continues to disrupt the present. Nevertheless, the film's closing sequences introduce clearer signs of *working through*, particularly when Oppenheimer articulates guilt more calmly and reflectively. The narrative therefore suggests that moving beyond traumatic repetition is gradual and incomplete: *acting out* remains dominant, but the film ends by staging an initial, tentative step toward reflective self-awareness.

Psychological Dynamics of Characters in a Biographical Perspective

Biopics and biographical historiography complement each other because both attempt to represent individual experience within a historical context. Wilfred L. Guerin in *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* (2005) argues that literary works and films often carry traces of personal experience and emotional condition. This framework enables the present study to assess how closely Nolan's cinematic representation aligns with historical accounts. In *Oppenheimer* (2023), the protagonist is depicted as spending more time in *acting out*, marked by repetitive and uncontrolled returns. By comparing those

depictions with biographical material, the analysis can clarify where the film reinforces documented patterns of trauma and where it reshapes them for dramatic effect.

This study uses *J. Robert Oppenheimer: Letters and Recollections* (1980) as a secondary source because it includes personal letters and testimonies that illuminate Oppenheimer's documented ethical reflection and emotional dynamics. The materials are organized chronologically (1942–1962), spanning the formation of the Manhattan Project through the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission hearing (Oppenheimer, 1980). This timeline makes it possible to track changes in the relative prominence of *acting out* and *working through* across different periods of his life. To make the comparison clearer, the analysis also uses visual aids to represent the chronological dynamics of both processes and to highlight how the documentary record may diverge from the film's dramatized emphasis.

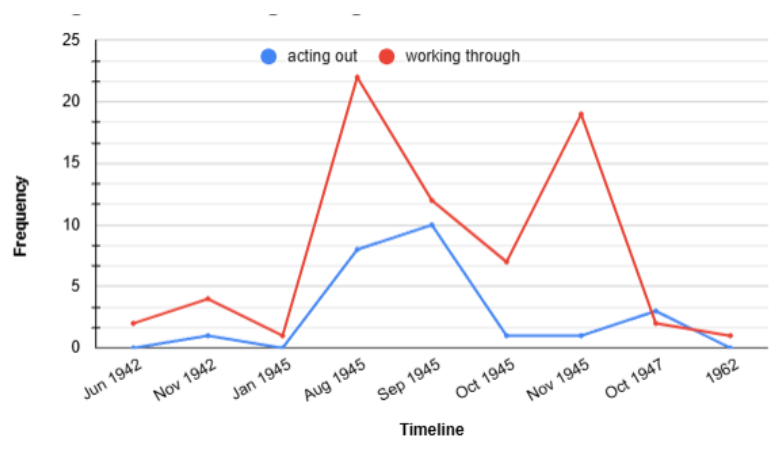


Figure 1. Frequency Graph in *J. Robert Oppenheimer: Trauma in Letters and Recollections*

As visualized in Figure 1, the biographical materials in *J. Robert Oppenheimer: Letters and Recollections* suggest that *working through* appears more frequently than *acting out*. The most noticeable increase occurs in the reflective period after August 6, 1945, when Oppenheimer begins to articulate moral anxiety and responsibility in a more deliberate manner. Although moments of *acting out* appear, they are not presented as the dominant or most recurrent pattern in the documentary record. This contrast becomes clearer when compared with the film, which foregrounds intrusive imagery and heightened psychological breakdown. One example of the more reflective tone in the letters appears in Oppenheimer's letter to Raymond T. Birge (September 29, 1951):

"and I hope that you will agree with me that in writing this letter to President Sproul I am laying a reasonable basis for all our futures, whatever they may be." (Oppenheimer, 1980)

This statement reflects an effort to reframe past experience in order to act toward the future, which is consistent with LaCapra's notion of *working through*. By contrast, the film tends to portray the same broader period as dominated by political pressure and

intensified inner turmoil, emphasizing disruption and loss of control rather than sustained reflective meaning-making.

A similar pattern appears in Oppenheimer's statement about the possibility that humanity might one day curse Los Alamos and Hiroshima:

"That pride must be tempered with a profound concern... the time will come when mankind will curse the names of Los Alamos and Hiroshima" (Oppenheimer, 1980)

This statement comes from Oppenheimer's speech on October 16, 1945, when he received the Secretary of War's Certificate of Appreciation on behalf of General Leslie Groves (Oppenheimer, 1980). Delivered to Los Alamos scientists only weeks after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the speech frames scientific pride as inseparable from "profound concern," because the atomic bomb was not merely a technical achievement but also a moral turning point with long-term consequences for humanity. In this sense, the documentary record presents Oppenheimer as engaging in reflective evaluation and ethical articulation soon after the bombings—features that align with *working through* rather than with compulsive repetition alone.

Based on biographical analysis, secondary data shows that this moral reflection was indeed an important part of the process of Oppenheimer's trauma development. Biographical records show a process of reflection that developed calmly, clearly, and structurally, indicating the dominance of the *working through* process as described in the previous acting out and working through graph. In other words, the biography depicts Oppenheimer as a figure who sought to process his trauma and moral dilemmas through continuous reflective reasoning.

The difference between the documentary record and the film becomes clearer when the two are read side by side. Although the end of *Oppenheimer* (2023) signals movement toward *working through*, most of the film's narrative emphasizes intensified inner struggle through destructive imagery and recurring hallucinations. This emphasis foregrounds *acting out* as an urgent and visually dramatic form of traumatic expression. In contrast, the letters and recollections depict a longer, more discursive process of ethical reasoning in which *working through* appears more sustained and structured. Therefore, rather than treating *acting out* and *working through* as final stages, the comparison suggests they are ongoing and overlapping psychological processes through which individuals negotiate moral responsibility in relation to historical events with far-reaching impact that help individuals form ethical and emotional understandings of historical events with far-reaching impacts.

CONCLUSION

This study examines how trauma is represented through the character of J. Robert Oppenheimer in *Oppenheimer* (2023) by comparing key scenes in the film with selected biographical documents, particularly Oppenheimer's letters. The analysis identifies 59 trauma-related instances: 32 cases (54%) indicate *acting out*, while 27 cases (46%) reflect *working through*. The findings show that the film constructs moral trauma through

recurring disruption, delayed return, and ethical self-confrontation, consistent with Caruth's (1996) concepts of *belatedness* and *repetition compulsion* as well as LaCapra's (2001) dynamics of *acting out* and *working through*. Comparison with the biographical materials further suggests that, while the film foregrounds visually intensified repetition, the documentary record portrays a more sustained process of reflective ethical articulation. Overall, the movement between *acting out* and *working through* in both the film and the historical documents supports the conclusion that these are not fixed endpoints, but ongoing psychological dynamics that shape how traumatic history is remembered and morally interpreted.

On the other hand, this study is limited to the analysis of Oppenheimer (2023) and a selected set of biographical documents, particularly personal letters. This limitation constrains the scope of historical comparison. In other words, this study only assesses the degree to which the film's representation corresponds to historical and biographical records, while aspects of popular aesthetics, marketing, or public reception are not part of the analysis. There is still room for further research through the expansion of historical sources and comparisons with representations of Oppenheimer in other biographical works to strengthen our understanding of the historical consistency of this figure across various media.

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