

SUNSET BOULEVARD:

A PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

by

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*Directed and co-written by Billy Wilder, and produced and co-written by Charles Brackett.
Distributed by Paramount Pictures, August 10, 1950*

SYNOPSIS

Joe Gillis (William Holden) is a down-and-out Hollywood screenwriter. Escaping from collection agency operatives intent on impounding his car, he has a flat tire and turns into the first convenient driveway . . . on Sunset Blvd. He has stumbled into the mansion of a once famous and now demented silent film star, Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson). The only other person living in the mansion is her butler (who, it turns out was also her first husband and the director who made her famous), Max (Erich von Stroheim). Norma is working on a comeback script for a film version of *Salome* and hires Gillis to edit it. In reality, she is looking for a young lover to keep her company and to preserve her own illusion of youth. Gillis meets Betty Schafer (Nancy Olson) with whom he collaborates on a script. Norma finds out about the relationship, jealously misinterprets it, and confronts both Betty and Joe. Joe tells Betty of his life as a gigolo and sends her away. Then, as he packs to leave her, Norma shoots and kills him.

Sunset Blvd. is a classic film of the 1950s chronicling the downward spiral toward death and insanity of a man and a woman inextricably enmeshed in psychic combat. It is a very complex film that can be approached profitably from any number of points of view. In the following analysis, I want to approach this film from strictly the man's place in dealing with the substitute mother to whom he becomes overly attached.

Incest is enough of a horror when encountered in the physical world. In this film, it is proposed that the couple is caught in its psychological equivalent: the man has not adequately separated himself from his own internal feminine and as a result has developed a debilitating relationship with his own mother image. The chance rendezvous in the corporeal realm with a woman whose own psychological problems activate his internal difficulties ultimately leads to his destruction. *Sunset Blvd.* is one of many films of a cycle called *film noir* that often deal with the destruction of men by evil women. Can the popularity of these films be accounted for by their (perhaps) therapeutic representation on screen of psychological incest?

On the surface, *Sunset Blvd.* is one of the darkest and most scathing criticisms of the Hollywood establishment and the Hollywood star system ever put on film (see also *The Bad and the Beautiful* [1952]). For this reason alone it is considered by many a classic. Louis B. Mayer, head of MGM at the time of the original release, after seeing a preview screening, is said to have been so incensed he went blind with rage, pulling director Billy Wilder aside

yelling, “You bastard! You have disgraced the industry that made you and fed you! You should be tarred and feathered and run out of Hollywood!”

Billy Wilder is a great director and *Sunset Blvd.* may be his greatest film (his other masterpieces include *The Lost Weekend* [1945], *Double Indemnity* [1944], *Ace in the Hole* [1951], and *Stalag 17* [1953]). His films uniquely combine his European sensitivity and background in German Expressionism both in filmmaking and in the graphic arts – a fascination with the darker side of the soul – with his foreigner's ear for a uniquely American means of expression and typically American values such as fame, eternal youth and nostalgia. He combines these, along with excellent camerawork, into a classic *films noir*. What Wilder (the director and co-author of *Sunset Blvd.*) achieves is a haunting and utterly unforgettable portrait of an aging actress ensconced in a dream world that gradually turns against her, becoming a nightmare, and a young writer half her age who is engulfed by her demented and illusionary past projected and materialized into the present.

However, *Sunset Blvd.* is much more than the text of its story. Seen at a psychological level, the film is the downward spiraling journey of the anti-hero. In many ways, it becomes a dark, mirror image of Joseph Campbell's famous Hero's Journey toward individuation. For instance, one of the differences between the Hero and the Anti-Hero is that the anti-hero rarely refuses the call to adventure; in fact, he or she usually plots to take advantage of the “call to adventure:” gangsters eagerly undertake the “last job” that will lead to their doom, Oedipus easily picks a fight with an old man at the crossroads, an

insurance salesman jumps at the chance to murder a husband and reap the rewards of money and sex (as in *Double Indemnity*). In the world of archetypal psychology, the only other personage to so readily succumb to the call is the Fool. And while filmic anti-heroes are often very, very foolish, they are far more tragic than the archetypal Fool.

There are other inversions of the Hero's Journey: The anti-hero is blessed with an ally who is a traitor rather than a helper (like the James Cagney character in *White Heat* [1949] whose adopted brother turns out to be an informer), or a magical talisman that is a sham (as the stolen money that will lead to happiness in *The Asphalt Jungle* [1950]), or a series of trials that overwhelms and that the characters neither totally perceive nor survive (as in *Double Indemnity*). In *Sunset Blvd.*, for example, the entry into the belly of the whale is a symbolic entry into a womb – Norma Desmond's great mansion – from which there is no escape. Joe Gillis encounters the devouring feminine and makes love to her, which, for the anti-hero surely spells doom.



Sunset Blvd. 00:13

In *Sunset Blvd.* that doom is writ large from the moment the screen first lights up. Seen symbolically, the first few scenes tell us reams about the psychic make-up of the central character. The first image shows not only a curb with “Sunset Blvd.” written on it, but an opening into a sewer. Translating the name of the street into its symbolic meaning we get “a broad street of endings and death.” But, in the same shot, we also see the gutter. We are told that this film is a view of the low life, the detrita of society. The typeface of the titles that appear over the dark, wet street is that of stencil, crudely broken into several pieces . . . as are the characters we soon meet. Under the titles, we continue moving backwards down the street. The meaning of moving backward

is obvious – regression, retreat, disengagement. Other meanings also apply. Walking backward is dangerous, we can't see where we are going and we are liable to trip and fall (in this case the impending fall is the Fall, as in the Garden of Eden after eating the forbidden fruit of Norma Desmond). And this is a perfect visually symbolic description of the hero's – or rather the anti-hero's – journey.

The story begins with a narration telling us it is five o'clock in the morning. Were this a normal hero's story, dawn could easily symbolize something new and fresh, a clean beginning. But with the anti-hero, everything is inverted. Normally, sunset is a time of endings and death, but here it is a sunrise that bodes ill – ironic! It is at five in the morning that we meet a corpse, floating face-down in a swimming pool, and soon learn that it is this very corpse that is narrating the story. Further ironies assault us: the police – typically the bad guys in a *film noir* – enter from the right, the side of the good. This introductory image is repeated several times to make sure we don't miss the irony. (There is another ironic pun in Gillis' name – he has “gills” in his name but can't survive underwater. The water here being a symbol for the dark, lethal psyche. In fact, Joe's name can be heard as “gill-less,” and thus unable to breath in the dark waters of the unconscious.)



Sunset Blvd. 2:27

The narrator offers the “whole truth.” But we must remember that truth at the level of the text, especially as narrated by the victim of a murder, may not be the same as the deeper psychological truth. For instance, we see a corpse floating in a pool. Since water often symbolizes the unconscious, we can safely conclude that it was his brash entry into the unconscious that was responsible for Joe's death. The rest of the film describes in detail the specific portion and aspects of the unconscious that got Joe Gillis into trouble.

The narrator then asks us to go back six months, a half of a yearly cycle, when the earth is on the opposite side of the sun. Again, our most common associations are inverted. Presumably, what is now bad will be good at the other end of the orbit – how little both he and we know. Actually, this half cycle goes from a very bad situation to the nadir of death and destruction. Also, the narrator now changes from using the third person, “he,” to the first person, “I.” It is further symbolic that he is living at a corner – of Franklin and Ivar – and thus, he is already at an intersection, a cusp, a potentially dangerous, unstable, place.

We now learn that the narrator is a writer of screenplays. He is a writer who writes stories that don't sell. He claims that they are not original enough, or, perhaps, too original. In either case, he is having difficulties with his Muse. In Western mythology, the Muse is typically a feminine figure and we can immediately conclude that the writer's problem is his connection to the feminine aspects of his unconscious.

His name, we find out when the collection agency sends two men to pick up his car, is Joseph T. Gillis. His mismanagement of and lack of money – symbolic of energy and power – are threatening his means of movement – symbolic of the possibility of psychic growth. Together with his difficulty with the feminine, we can see that this man is in real trouble.



Sunset Blvd. 5:08

His car, it turns out, is hidden behind Rudy's Shoeshine Parlor. Now, shining one's shoes is the same as improving one's Persona – that outermost part of the personality that we present to the world. And shoes can represent our standpoint, or point of view. Both these positive ideas, persona and point of view, have been corrupted by Gillis simply to hide his car from the collection agency. (To further emphasize Joe's lack of point of view, he answered the door barefooted.)



Sunset Blvd. 3:41

This psychological theme will be repeated throughout the film: what for you and for me are mostly positive elements are corrupted, debased, and degraded by Gillis (and the other characters in the film). This ultimately leads to his psychic dissolution and physical death.

As with all good fairy tales of horror, the story actively distracts us from its psychological underpinnings. When Gillis goes to see about his story,

“Bases Loaded,” for instance, the mention of the Paramount and Twentieth Century Studios, of Tyrone Power and Alan Ladd, all give the film a veneer of documentary truth – this film really *is* about Hollywood. And indeed, it is, but we should not forget it is also about a single individual human being and his downfall. Furthermore, it is a story that captivates us and holds us in thrall – as all good films do – and this implies it has deep psychological meanings. And it is to this level of the story that we must take heed.



Sunset Blvd. 6:31

We are now presented with a very important encounter between Gillis and Betty Schafer, a young woman who works as a studio script reader and who finds his story flat and trite. The studio executive, who even gets her name wrong – he calls her Kramer – unfeelingly allows her to say out loud how bad she thinks the script is, knowing full well that the author is only a few inches behind her. Obviously, the producer's regard for the feminine, let alone the female, is quite low (this stands in considerable contrast to the way C.B. DeMille later treats Norma Desmond – with kindness and understanding).

This encounter, needless to say, makes instant bad blood between Gillis and Schafer. However, we can immediately see that Schafer represents the positive and absent aspect of Gillis' unconscious feminine. She is also the kind, nurturing, and non-devouring feminine that he needs at the more prosaic level. This becomes evident later in the film when they cooperate on a successful writing project and fall in love. But for the time being, he rejects her at the physical level just as he has rejected the internal version of her within himself, much to his detriment.

On his way home from being turned down by several studios, friends, and his agent, Gillis takes inventory of his prospects. At the very moment that he concludes that they add up to “exactly zero,” he finds himself on Sunset Blvd. Thus, we learn that this street is the land of “zero,” a place of spiritual destitution, of the psychic bottom of the barrel. Under other circumstances,

that is, the Hero's Journey, the Zero would constellate other meanings: wholeness, completion, the Oroborous, and totality. But this, we must remember, is the anti-hero's Journey.

At the moment when Gillis' self-assessment totals zero, disaster strikes: the very men attempting to repossess his car spot him at an intersection. He makes a quick U-turn in an attempt to escape; whatever intentions he had, he is now headed in the opposite direction. They follow and the chase is on.

In this land of zero, all sorts of negative events take place. First, he has a blowout. That is, he loses air from his means of transportation; any possibility of growth and movement he might have had is now deflated, literally. Second, he pulls into the first convenient driveway. A synchronistic coincidence of events often leads to benefit, as when just the right book falls on you while strolling through the library, but in the land of Zero Prospects, the opposite takes place.

With adequate psychic preparation, the hero makes ready for the random event, can take advantage of it and use it to a good end. At the opposite pole is Gillis; because of the lack of connection with his unconscious, everything that happens is negative. Rather than finding a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, he finds death.



Sunset Blvd. 13:33

When Gillis turns his attention to the house onto which he has stumbled, we get a wonderful description of the house, and simultaneously a description of Joe's neglected and damaged psyche: “It was a great big white elephant of a place . . . A neglected house gets an unhappy look. This one had it in spades. It was like that old woman in *Great Expectations*, that Miss Havisham, in her rotting wedding dress and her torn veil, taking it out on the world because she had been given the go-by.”

The mention of a wedding brings to mind the image of the Conunctio between the feminine and masculine aspects of the psyche that should ultimately lead to the regeneration and rebirth of an elevated and whole psyche. But in *Sunset Blvd.*, everything is stood on its head. The Conunctio will lead to Gills' destruction. Indeed, his Anima, his internal feminine, can easily be compared to Miss Havisham: she too has been given the go-by. But unlike Miss Havisham, she will now materialize and wreck vengeance on him.

And we do not have long to wait, for the moment he sets foot on the stairs, a female voice calls out, "Why have you kept me waiting so long?" At the symbolic level, it is obvious that this is his long ignored internal feminine. Like a spider beckoning to a fly, he is being lured to his own destruction. The body of the film is a discovery of the exact nature of his negative and destructive feminine. But for the time being, we know that she is summoning Gillis as if she were familiar with him. We soon learn that he has been mistaken for an animal mortician comes to take the body of a dead pet monkey away.



Sunset Blvd. 14:52

This scene is so symbolically over-determined that it is difficult to take it all in. First, Max the butler, tells Gillis that, “Madam is waiting.” Thus, our assumption about the call of the feminine is verified. Second, Max comments that he is improperly dressed for the occasion. Symbolically, this means that he has the wrong Persona. Third, he is told to go upstairs, into the upper regions of the architectural metaphor for the psyche. What should be in the upper regions are the best aspects, the super-ego, but what Gillis finds is his now nascent death. Fourth, when Max offers to help with the coffin, Gillis almost convulses at the word, “coffin.” Thus, the concept of death has been introduced. Finally, we are given the complex symbolism of the Monkey.

Typically, animal pets symbolize instinct. A good example of this is Toto in *The Wizard of Oz* [1939] who is always getting Dorothy into exactly the right kind of trouble she needs in order to progress on her journey of maturation. Norma Desmond's pet, by contrast, is dead. Are we to conclude from this that Gillis' instincts are dead? If not dead, they are certainly ineffective in keeping him out of trouble. He is asked to bury the dead monkey in the back yard. Thus, instinct will be plunged into permanent darkness and will be repressed into the unconscious to make sure it cannot interfere with the destructive power of the negative feminine that will lead Gillis to his death.

More information resides in the fact that the animal is specifically a monkey. This is even more depressing. Monkeys often symbolize the Trickster Archetype, the one that turns the tables on the hero, apparently getting him in a bad place that actually turns out to be just what he needed to either save himself or grow. If this is so, then *Sunset Blvd.* is clearly saying that the Trickster is tricking Gillis onto the correct path, a downward spiral to his own destruction. Depressing indeed.

Another interpretation of the monkey is in the fact that it was Desmond's pet and must now be replaced. It becomes clear later – especially in a dream that Gillis has – that he is now to be her new monkey. Like her previous pet, Gillis will be groomed, fed, and pampered, but expected to obey. And like the current monkey, Gillis too will wind up dead in the back yard.

Gillis then recognizes the woman. Of course he does, she is part of his own psyche simply projected outward. Significantly, he says that she used to be in silent pictures, that is, she had no voice, no power to command him. The use of the past tense, “used to be,” is significant for now she does have a voice. And here occurs the most famous line from the film, as Norma Desmond says, “I’m still big; it’s the pictures that got small.”

However, most people quoting the film ignore Gillis’ response, “I knew there was something wrong.” While shrouded in sarcasm this may be his only moment of psychological lucidity. At this point he still has the power to walk out of Desmond’s clutches and return to Ohio, to an unexciting job on a Mid-Western newspaper. However, he so desperately needs to prove himself to be above the ordinary, to inflate his ego, that he will grasp at any straw. And Desmond offers far more than a straw.

Gillis shows no respect for Desmond; he makes quips like, “Next time I’ll bring my autograph album . . . or a chunk of cement for your footprints.” It is extremely dangerous to be flippant when confronting the destructive aspects of the Feminine.

Instinctively knowing how to trap Gillis, Desmond offers him a writing job. Just what he has been looking for. But again, like so many things in this film, the reality turns out to be the mirror image of the assumptions the characters make. She is writing a script for the story of *Salome* – her synopsis: a wanton in love with a holy man who rejects her and whose head she demands

on a plate. Here, of course, is the story we are watching unfold – except for the holiness of the man, of course. As Gillis sinks into a comfortable chair – at her command – and looks forward to a comfortable drink – also at her command. We know he is trapped. Gillis thinks *he* is hatching a plot to bilk some money out of a crazy and vulnerable old woman. However, what is really happening is that he is playing into her traps.

In passing, Gillis mentions that he was born on December 21. This is the day of the Winter Solstice, the day when the life-giving sun is farthest from earth, the day winter begins in the Northern Hemisphere. The symbolism of this day in Gillis' quickly ebbing life is obvious.

Max, Norma Desmond's butler, we find out later, was also once her husband and the director who made her famous. He tells Gillis that he made up the bed for him to stay earlier that afternoon. Gillis asks how he knew so many hours ago, long before Gillis himself decided, that he was staying. The question goes unanswered. But we can easily divine the answer from Max's symbolic role: he is the director (he plays this role again in the film's closing scene). He has read the script; he knows all along what will happen. He is the Archetype of prescience.



Sunset Blvd. 25:42

Gillis' observations of the house and its grounds continue. Again, these reflect his own diseased psyche. The whole place suffers from a “creeping paralysis.” The tennis court has a sagging net and fading lines. That is, the game cannot be properly played and, because the indistinct boundary lines have insufficient definition, the demarcation between legal and illegal, between psychic safety and transgression, is lacking or indistinct. The tennis court perhaps best symbolizes Gillis' true downfall, as we shall see.



Sunset Blvd. 26:04

In addition, the swimming pool is dry as his own unconscious is dried up.
(Actually, it is occupied by rats.)



Sunset Blvd. 26:24

Then we see the monkey's funeral at the very moment Gillis settles in – fade to black.

The next morning, Gillis finds himself fully moved in; his books, his clothes, his typewriter have all been brought and unpacked. Caught and trapped.

As they begin work on Desmond's script – the job for which he was hired – Gillis finds she will not tolerate any excisions or alterations. (The obvious question is, of course, if she really did not want any changes in her

script, why did she hire him?) It is as if the script were a script of his own life and must be played out in every detail that has been set down by the crazed pen of the vengeful feminine.

As Norma Desmond buys him clothes, and even regulates his gum chewing, Gillis realizes that he is a kept man. We realize that she is acting like a strange combination of his mother and his lover. From her point of view, there is nothing wrong with this relationship. After all, she is still a young movie star. But from Gillis' side, we see incest written everywhere. And this is the true nature of the tragedy we are watching.

As winter approaches, Gillis moves into the main house – closer to Desmond – because the room over the garage leaks. (The roof, like his own super-ego, is full of holes.) Weather, the feminine element, moves him closer to his destruction. This, too, goes contra to our expectations of the weather in a typical movie love story: the lovers meet in spring, fall in love in summer, get settled in fall, separate in winter and then come back together in spring. Thus, coming together in winter bodes ill for all concerned.



Sunset Blvd. 39:21

Ensnared in the big house, Gillis finds out that there are no locks on the doors because “Madame,” as Max puts it, attempts an occasional suicide. At the psychological level, of course, the barriers within Gillis' psyche are now unlocked and he is vulnerable to attack – his ego strength is rapidly failing him. The barriers that normally separate objects that, if combined – like “mother” and “physical love” – could cause trouble are no longer functioning.

That very night is a fateful New Year's Party. He is the only guest. And finds out that Norma is in love with him – her surrogate son. And here begins the full revelation of the misaligned Conunctio, an incestuous one. The nature

of its misalignment is made evident not only by the fact that Norma is older than Gillis, but also in that the actions Gillis allows her to take upon him indicate his psychological deficits. What we see here is psychological, if not physical, incest. Adult men are vulnerable to the destructive external feminine if they themselves have not yet resolved their internal problems with the feminine, the mother image.

In the external world, if a mother holds on to her son too long, he is seen as a “Momma's Boy,” weak, spineless, and unable to function independently. In extreme cases, the son takes on the personality of the mother in a psychological merging with the mother who will not let go. This is clearly seen in films like *Psycho* [1960].

On the other hand – and I am not sure that this case is clearly separated from the first – it may be the man who refuses to let go of the mother. Here we have a man who cannot do anything without his mother's guidance or approval; he is still a child. (The best film example James Cagney's mother obsessed gangster in *White Heat*.) If taken to extreme, both cases represent a psychological merging of mother and son. Were this to happen in the external world, we would call it incest. Is there a psychological equivalent of incest? I believe there is, and this is the root of the men's problems in many *films noir* and in *Sunset Blvd.*

While it is rarely explicitly explored in the films themselves, these men are vulnerable to the femme fatale's wiles because they cannot say “no” to an

internal mother from whom they have not yet separated themselves. As a young man matures, he must have a divorce from his internal mother image, and he must stop projecting it onto other women. The most common manifestation of a Mother Complex is that a man falls in love only with women who resemble his own mother; the young man cannot let go of the mother image. Gillis' problem is an interesting variation of this. In his case, the internal mother is certainly destructive, but she will not let go.

Desmond's hold on Gillis' unconscious becomes clear in the next sequence of events. At the very moment Gillis meets Betty again and is beginning to fall in love with her – the appropriate *Conunctio* – Desmond raises the psychic stakes and attempts suicide. Many unfortunate mothers (and lovers) in the real world make a similar “her or me” ultimatum. Rather than let her die (which would set him free), Gillis rushes back to his mother substitute in a spasm of guilt and abandons Betty.

While Gillis' problem may be a very delayed divorce from the mother image, Norma's is quite different. She has bought into the Hollywood's – and America's – youth cult. She believes that the only woman worth anything is a young woman and she has therefore unrealistically set out to take on the trappings of youth – film stardom and a young lover.

The rest of the middle section of the film involves Gillis' budding romance with Betty . . . and Norma's revenge. At the symbolic level, we realize immediately that his relationship with Betty cannot be successful because he

is commuting to the studio in Norma's car. Thus, Desmond has control over even this aspect of Gillis' life. The script that Joe and Betty are working on, by the way, is called "Untitled Love Story." Since it has no name, it can have no substance – another indicator that it can never work between them.

We can declare Joe Gillis' case hopeless when, in his final confrontation with Betty, he opts to stay with Norma because of the assurance of continuing comfort rather than the uncertainty, economic and emotional, of the outside world. Joe Gillis finally recognizes that he is a coward.



Sunset Blvd. 1:48:36

Norma is clearly insane; yet she is no more insane than Joe. In a final gesture, useless and too late, he releases Betty from the vortex into which he has inadvertently drawn her and sends her back to a more appropriate life. The fact that he is finally packing to leave is meaningless, for it is too late. He has been infected in such a way that remorse is an insufficient means of escape – just as it could not save Oedipus or any of the other tragic heroes of myth and literature.

The bottom line of this film is a clear warning: psychological health must be earned and, even more so, prepared for. Gillis finds himself mired deeply in a psychic incestuous relationship. Had he rejected the destructive internal mother image, he might have climbed out of the psychic sewer into which he has fallen. But the Joe Gillis we find in *Sunset Blvd.* is beyond help. At the end of the film, each character gets what they wanted all along. Gillis has finished his story, and it has been made into a film – the film we are watching. And Norma is once again in front of the cameras. Another manifestation of the saying, “Be careful of what you wish for, you may get it.” Gillis is dead and Desmond is hopelessly lost in dementia.

FILM CREDITS

Directed By

Billy Wilder

Writing Credits

Charles Brackett

D.M. Marshman Jr.

Billy Wilder

Cast overview, first billed only:

William Holden

Gloria Swanson

Erich von Stroheim

Nancy Olson

Fred Clark (I)

Lloyd Gough

Jack Webb

Franklyn Farnum

Larry J. Blake

Charles Dayton (I)

Joe Gillis

Norma Desmond

Max Von Mayerling

Betty Schaefer

Sheldrake

Morino

Artie Green

Undertaker

First Finance Man

Second Finance Man

Cast continued..

Cecil B. DeMille	Himself
Hedda Hopper	Herself
Buster Keaton	Himself
Anna Q. Nilsson	Herself
H.B. Warner	Himself