

## Soul-making and the Colorado Shooting: James Holmes as the Joker, Trickster, Savior

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### **Abstract**

On July 20, 2012, 24-year-old James Holmes invaded the Century movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, killing 12 and wounding 70 people. Some initial police reports said that Holmes claimed to be the Joker, an iconic villain from the Batman comic book series, bringing to mind an image of the Trickster archetype for those of us involved in archetypal psychology. After Holmes' attack, the usual litany of solutions was wielded by law enforcement, journalists, and politicians on both sides of the ideological aisle: gun control, mental health, better security, school bullying, absent parents, and moral values. This paper, while recognizing all of these as legitimate concerns, explores the possibility that there is a deeper unseen issue that has to do with our current assumed Western psycho-cosmology that seeks to eliminate suffering. What if the *ultimate aim* of human existence is not to eradicate violence and suffering, but to make souls through such struggles? And of course we need to work to lessen suffering, but what if that work itself, in conjunction with the suffering, is why we are on this planet? Jung said that all neuroses arise from the refusal to legitimately suffer. Is it possible that our disdain for and disrespect of legitimate suffering is giving rise to these complementary acts of unspeakable violence?

### **Keywords**

Aurora shootings, James Holmes, violence, trickster, soul-making, suffering

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*There is no consciousness without discrimination of opposites.*

— Carl G. Jung (*CW* 9i, § 178)

In 1965, a broadly published debate was held between two philosophical adversaries named Arnold Gehlen and Theodor Adorno regarding the nature of suffering and violence in the world. At one point Ghelen questions Adorno about the necessity of suffering, incredulous that one would doubt that the aim of human existence is to emancipate people from all suffering. Here is part of that debate:

GEHLEN: “Mr. Adorno, you see the problem of emancipation here once again, of course. Do you really believe that the burden of fundamental problems, of extensive reflection, of errors in life that have profound and continuing effects, all of which we have gone through because we were trying to swim free of them—do you really believe one ought to expect everyone to go through this? I should be very interested to know your views on this.”

ADORNO: “I can give you a simple answer. Yes! I have a particular conception of objective happiness and objective despair, and I would say that, for as long as people have problems taken away from them, for as long as they are not expected to take full responsibility and full self-determination, their welfare and happiness in this world will merely be an illusion. And will be an illusion that will one day burst. *And when it bursts, it will have dreadful consequences.*” (italics mine) (Safranski 407-08)

Perhaps 24-year-old James Holmes who killed 12 and wounded 70 people at a Century movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, on July 20, 2012, is a current example of what Adorno is talking about—“a *burst[ing] forth with dreadful consequences*” in a world that expects to avoid all discomforts in life. Or perhaps Ghelen is right when he suggests that the aim of human existence is “to swim free of them [problems].” This controversial debate addresses not only the issue of “violence” but the larger role that violence plays in the cosmic scheme of things. Is it possible or even desirable to end violence? Does violence play a necessary role in human existence? Ghelen and Adorno hold two very different positions. Let's explore these positions from a depth psychological perspective.

First off, such “bursting-forths” of violence and public mayhem may be found throughout recorded human history. Mythically, the perpetrators of such antisocial actions have been labeled “Trickster” by academics.<sup>1</sup> Tricksters appear in stories and rituals from every culture as socially disruptive characters who might defecate in public, engage in inappropriate sexual liaisons, deceive without shame, or commit felonious acts of violence and other lawless exploits. The trickster's demeanor covers a broad continuum, ranging from slapstick comic to homicidal rapist, with many variations in between those two extremes. Paradoxically tricksters are also frequently portrayed as cultural hero/heroines, pulling the rug out from under the established order so that something revelatory and innovative might appear in its place. One such character in popular American culture is the Joker, Batman's archenemy appearing in comics, television shows and movies. The Joker is a highly intelligent homicidal psychopath, always smiling during his antinomian escapades. He, like most tricksters, is a strange concoction of despairing anomie mingled with manic extroverted energy,<sup>2</sup> which is how James Holmes was described just before his violent outburst in the Colorado movie theater as it premiered *The Dark Knight Rises*. In fact some sources reported that Holmes told the police, as they arrested him without a struggle, that he was Batman's nemesis, the Joker (Winter).

In the comic books, Joker makes it clear that he will never kill the Batman because the caped crusader is the necessary counterweight that keeps the Joker animated and thriving. Batman stands for complete law and order, while the Joker stands for lawlessness and chaos. Neither can meaningfully exist without the other. This is an archetypal pattern that can be traced back to ancient Egyptian mythology. The Egyptians imagined two contrasting deities named *Isfet* and *Ma'at*, who personified the cosmic drama between chaos and order. *Isfet* represented injustice, evil, chaos and “socio-political unrest, forming the necessary counterpoint to *Ma'at*, who personified justice, harmony and sociopolitical law and order. The two gods formed a complementary and paradoxical dualism that kept each other and the cosmos in balance. According to Maulana Karenga in his book *Maat: The Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt*, the role of the Egyptian pharaoh was to destroy *Isfet* in order to attain and maintain *Ma'at* (71-73). In the Batman comics Gotham City is like Egypt, a dwelling where people are trying to carve safety and cultural order (*Ma'at*) out of terror and chaos (*Isfet*). The Batman (Bruce Wayne) is akin to the pharaoh working incessantly to attain and maintain law and order. As a boy, Bruce Wayne’s parents were killed by the forces of evil, and Wayne grew up to become the Batman, a wealthy corporate billionaire who developed personal discipline and technological inventions to secure an orderly existence in Gotham by subduing all disorder and instability. In both the Egyptian and Batman mythologies there is no possibility of one without the other. As with Aristotle’s notion of a great plot, there is no drama without conflict. A similar idea is found in the Hebrew Bible and Hesiod’s *Theogony*, where primordial Chaos is a murky void from which night and day, light and darkness and all created order emerge. Similarly, the Chinese yin/yang symbol portrays light and dark swirling (like gas or air) together as the primeval elements of creation from which all order emerges and returns. Even the secular Freud eventually identified *Eros* and *death* to be the two most basic instinctual constituents of the human psyche, locked in a perpetual struggle for obliteration or civilization. Freud writes:

After long hesitations and vacillations we have decided to assume the existence of only two basic instincts, *Eros* and *the destructive instinct*...The aim of the first of these basic instincts is to establish ever greater unities and to preserve them thus—in short, to bind together; the aim of the second is, on the contrary, to undo connections and so to destroy things. In the case of the destructive instinct we may suppose that its final aim is to lead what is living into an inorganic state. For this reason we also call it the *death instinct*. (148)

With this background, let’s return to the opening words of the debate at the point where Ghelen incredulously asks Adorno if he actually believes that all humans “ought” to go through problems *reflectively* rather than strive to create a world where we can “swim free of” all problems. Adorno argues that avoidance of problems will not make things better, but will actually bring about the opposite

effect, resulting in what he calls “dreadful consequences.” Adorno believes that struggling with problems and overcoming them is the ultimate source of all *real* happiness. Similar to the struggle between the Egyptian *Isfet* and *Ma’at*, Adorno believes that life presents each individual with experiences of “objective despair” (chaos), which have the potential to be turned into “objective happiness” (order) by taking “full responsibility and full self-determination.” If humans do not personally or collectively enter into the grappling match between order and chaos, “their welfare and happiness in this world will merely be an illusion.” In other words, if we humans were to live in a problem-free world, the resultant “happiness” would be illusory and superficial. But then Adorno adds the troubling conclusion: Whenever humans do succeed in temporarily eliminating the struggles of existence, opting for an easier version of happiness, such happiness “will be an illusion that will one day burst. *And when it bursts, it will have dreadful consequences.*” In other words, externally bequeathed happiness that is not achieved through personal effort is always ephemeral, and when real life (problematic life) catches up, the consequences will be “dreadful”—not just disappointing, but dreadful—filled with terror, fear, and what Mel Brooks called “high anxiety”!

Let’s consider this from a depth psychological perspective, specifically with regard to the Colorado theater massacre perpetrated by James Holmes, as well as other acts of mindboggling social violence being broadcast in the media these days. Ours is a culture obsessed with law and order, justice for all and equality without discrimination—and I concur that these are all virtuous and worthy goals. I am not for one second denigrating these righteous and humane intentions. Justice and order (*Ma’at*) are always noble and desired goals for any civilized culture—however, when viewed myopically, as the sole aim of human existence, we set ourselves up for increasing disasters and *dreadful consequences*. If, as Adorno suggests, problems are required for human development, then our efforts to eliminate them entirely sets us up for equilibrating and compensatory consequences that may be devastating. The attempt to eliminate all madness and disintegration from human existence is tantamount to making a bowl of plastic fruit that will never decompose. Everything appears perfect, until one is actually starving—then the happy artifice becomes a nightmare. Let’s now apply this to the extreme situation of James Holmes’ homicidal behavior at the theater. What are we to *make* of this horrific “problem”? What are we to *do* about it, or with it?

Law enforcement agencies, journalists and politicians on both sides of the ideological aisle immediately made this horrific act a “problem” about guns, mental health, better security, political legislation, functional parenting, school bullying, moral values and 101 other important yet secondary literalisms. Their answers are almost always more laws and regulation. Others, the more spiritual types, typically remind us, or preach to us, to “just love one another.” James Hillman reminds us that in a soul-making approach, love is a means, not an end: “Love [is] neither the goal nor the way, but [...] one of many means of putting our humanity through a complicated imaginal process” (189). The soul-making process is primary, and not to be confused with the innumerable means to that end. We live in a world of countless negative and positive dualities, but these striking

phenomena are merely the pencils and erasers that compose the unique psychological poem that each of us is becoming.

While law and love are legitimate concerns and necessary means, perhaps the deeper unseen problem is our lack of comprehending the role that such tragedies are meant to *play* in psychological development. External solutions provide comfort, for a time, but they do not grapple with the “objective despair” that permeates the personal and national psyche in the wake of these unimaginable atrocities. A depth psychological approach would encourage our politicians, educators, therapists, journalists, ministers and parents at the dinner table to revolve the kaleidoscope of imagination in order to “see through” the banal and literal. We must allow the human heart to be broken by the “objective despair” felt in this mindless horror show—the same heart residing in the chests of both liberals and conservatives. Perhaps these palpable disasters arise from an archetypal *Isfet* or the cosmic Freudian *death instinct* in order to equilibrate our psychological indolence, or to move us beyond our bipartisan political squabbling, or to move us to actual cultural concerns rather than pedantic academic theorizing. In addition to external legislative and the clichéd “all you need is love” solutions, we might also explore the deeper psychological effects of movies, movie theaters, shopping malls, university educations and culture in general on the state of the soul. Will we take this approach? Not likely. And the Joker/Trickster will strike again and again, doing what tricksters have done throughout mythic history—pull the rug out from under human stability, reminding us that we live in a cosmos where chaos and order are always swirling together to facilitate deeper soul-making experiences.

The ambush from a “Trickster” is not meant merely to be managed externally, but to be explored internally resulting in lived results based on such reflections, in that order. The chaotic trickster exists to present us with “objective despair” in order to move us along in the soul-making experience toward real happiness and genuine joy. This developmental aspect of the Trickster archetype is what makes him/her a kind of “Savior” as well. Jung addresses this issue by referring to the biblical God Yahweh as both heroic Savior and sociopathic Trickster:

If we consider [...] the daemonic features exhibited by Yahweh in the Old Testament, we shall find in them not a few reminders of the unpredictable behaviour of the trickster, of his pointless orgies of destruction and his self-appointed sufferings [of human beings], together with the same gradual developments into a saviour and his simultaneous humanization. It is just this transformation of the meaningless into the meaningful that reveals the trickster's compensatory relation to the “saint” [...]. (qtd. in Radin 196)

This same Trickster/Savior paradox may be found in Jesus' frequent violations of the Jewish ceremonial laws, his associations with notorious tax collectors and prostitutes, his felonious cleansing of the temple and his treasonous claim to

kingship, resulting in his crucifixion between two convicted terrorists. Jesus is quoted as saying:

“Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household. Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” (Matt. 10:34-37)

Theologians and ministers often attempt to soften these antisocial Trickster activities of Christ the “Savior,” yet in Jesus’ day they garnered him the sociopathic epithets of madman, sinner, demon-possessed and felon—appellations worthy of all Savior-Tricksters. Here my point is not to say that Yahweh and Jesus are just like James Holmes, but rather to suggest that all psychological and social change arrive via some kind of chaotic disintegration. Trickster/Savior, *Isfet/Ma’at*, Batman/Joker, Eros/Death always work in tandem in a soul-making universe.

Chaos is not the problem. How we view chaos is the problem. Chaos is the source of all creativity and psycho-spiritual transformation. I believe that is what Adorno is getting at when he says he sees a world that yields “a particular conception of objective happiness and objective despair.” Without the objective despair, there is no happiness; without the objective chaos, there is no creativity; without necessary destruction, there is no development. It seems to me that Adorno is saying that when we fail to integrate this dualistic nature of reality into our lives by attempting to eliminate the uncomfortable side of the equation, the chaotic and destructive experiences will burst onto the scene in a compensatory fashion. Pushing the hellish nature of re-creative chaos away from us is like jamming a clown back into the proverbial jack-in-the-box. Eventually the tension will cause the Joker to pop out and terrify all who are nearby, calling each to examine his or her existential priorities.

Is this a pessimistic view? If we are able to rid ourselves of all suffering and create a legislated Utopia of unceasing love and peace, then yes, I am a pessimist. However, if chaos is as necessary to this human condition as is order, then I am providing a very optimistic corrective. If all chaos and suffering exist as *part of the package* in order to call attention back to the soul-making endeavor of human existence, then to believe we can eliminate all chaos is a malevolent fantasy. If we have been put on this planet to<sup>3</sup> conquer all disease and eliminate all chaos, then I am a gloomy naysayer. But if the basic cosmic pattern, which manifests in the human psyche, is that of perpetually moving from chaos to order, and then into more chaos and subsequent order, I am providing a necessary reminder: that the *ultimate and primary* aim of human existence is not to end suffering, but to make soul at the personal, cultural and cosmic levels. I am proposing a view that will not end *all* suffering, but it will help to end the kind of

suffering that results from the illusion of ending *all* suffering. I am arguing that if this Colorado event and others like it are unheeded by our individual and collective psyches, and if we place all of our energy into “solving the problem” rather than seeing such events as symptomatic and purposeful, actions like it will be repeated over and over. Such occurrences may become pandemic. Perhaps even some rogue nation will take on the role of the World-Trickster as did Nazi Germany in 1939.

It would appear that the tacit assumption, of many modern Westerners at least, is that our politicians can eliminate all pain and suffering, creating a society and eventually a world of ease and abundance from the cradle to the grave. Our television shows are filled with *Law and Order*, *CSI*, hospitals fixing all medical problems, *Judge Judy* and half a dozen other court programs distributing perfect justice. Many people seem to be increasingly concerned with social justice, fairness, equity, and never hurting anyone’s feelings. And we have come to expect our leaders to solve the injustices, to make everyone safe and secure 100% of the time. We elect politicians who promise to make us free from all possible chaos. Laws proliferate, from wearing seat belts to whom we may marry, from dictating what we can smoke or eat. Approximately 40,000 laws were passed by Congress in 2013 and are scheduled to be implemented in 2014 (“2014’s New American Laws...”). I acknowledge and applaud the noble and good intentions behind such aims, but when legislated without recognizing the purposeful necessity of their opposites as inevitable and even oddly beneficial, we are inviting Trickster to show up with a vengeance in order to equilibrate our hubris and arrogance. Carl Jung noted, from his therapeutic practice, that most people look outside of themselves for a Savior to solve their calamities—to politicians, lovers or moralists to “fix” things—but this is looking in the wrong place. He writes:

In the history of the collective as in the history of the individual, everything depends on the development of consciousness. This gradually brings liberation from imprisonment in *αγνοια* [agnōia], unconsciousness, and is therefore a bringer of light as well as healing. As in its collective, mythological form, so also the individual shadow contains within it the seed of enantiodromia, of a conversion into its opposite. (*CW* 9i, § 487)

The Game of Life will always have two opposing teams, internally and externally. The ancient Greeks did this by creating the Panhellenic Games from which our modern Olympics derive. From this depth psychological perspective, our *primary* goal is to find the most creative and humane ways to allow for the creative clash of dualities rather than try to eliminate the disturbing opposite. In this view, human development always requires some form of psycho-spiritual isometrics—strength through resistance. Even infants require the bumps and bruises bequeathed through gravity and hard objects in order to develop healthy musculature and skeletal structure. A newborn raised in zero gravity would shrivel up and die. The psychological analogue is obvious.

The role of the trickster in all cultural myths is to fracture the pervading psycho-social structure—to bring fragmentation into the logical order by yanking the civilizing rug out from under us. Trickster’s aim is always to overturn the established rules, laws, order, norms, safeguards and the security of a people trusting solely in the laws of the sociopolitical routine founded on human ingenuity—as if the aim of life were to never experience any distress. Even our medical profession has become a system that aims at pharmaceutically induced orderliness via drugs—“keep ‘em flat-lined and unaffected” so they can go to work and buy more stuff or pay more taxes. The goal of the Trickster archetype is to return us to raw creative chaos—to the untidy disorder that precedes new ideas and attitudes of soul. If we fail to consider James Holmes’ atrocity as a kind of cultural Trickster phenomenon—as a collective dream (nightmare) with archetypal images for us to gather insights from—such incidents may escalate in frequency and scope. The next Joker may not toss a smoke bomb into a theater while wielding an assault weapon, but a dirty radioactive bomb into a shipping container, or launch a nuclear missile into a major urban center.

Lastly, let me state clearly that I am neither justifying nor excusing Holmes or any other heinous acts of violence. I am not minimizing the unimaginable losses and grief of the families. I lost a son to war in Afghanistan and know the reconstructive hell of the Trickster pattern. I am not asking people to stop seeking justice as they perceive justice, or to cease seeking cures for deadly diseases or the end to war. Our aim as humans, in my view, is to love and care for others, to bring healing and order to life. However, I am asking that we look more deeply into the significance of cultural and personal tragedies. If Adorno is correct, then this “bursting forth” in Colorado may carry a revelation from the unconscious—that life is comprised of “objective happiness and objective despair,” and that “as long as people have problems taken away from them [...] their welfare and happiness in this world will merely be an illusion. And will be an illusion that will one day burst. *And when it bursts, it will have dreadful consequences.*” If we continue to deny or ignore the necessity of problems by numbing ourselves with distractions and by insisting on creating utopian external solutions, then we can expect greater and greater compensatory nightmares to get our attention. If the pain of ordinary events does not call us to reflective soul-making, the pains of extraordinary events will, and such events may escalate, forcing us to do what must be done for our psycho-spiritual development.

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<sup>1</sup> In the study of mythology, folklore and religion, a trickster is a deity, spirit, human or anthropomorphized animal who violates social standards and plays tricks on others. According to George P. Hansen in *The Trickster and the Paranormal*, the term “Trickster” was probably first used in this context by Daniel G. Brinton in 1885.

<sup>2</sup> This is a state of mind officially designated by modern psychiatry as “Dysphoric Mania.” In this state a person may feel depressed and hopeless, while feeling activated and energetic at the same time (Chan).

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