

Spiritual Growth Under the Hero's Journey: The Portrayal of the Little Man from Korean Film *Ode to My Father*

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Abstract

The research on the inner growth of characters is something lacking in current cinematic characterization. Little characters have an inherent commonplace nature that easily resonates with the audiences, but also usually have a tendency to get trapped in the description of the grueling daily grind. Therefore, the key is how to break through the insignificance of their roles to shape the little people's personality charm in films. *Ode to My Father*, a Korean film for "millions of viewers", successfully created a heroic little protagonist, following the framework of a hero's journey with a plot of departure, enlightenment and return. Under the mask of the "elder" personality, this character reaches his self-reconciliation and completes the journey of individuation after a gradual self-awakening and valiantly confrontation with his inner shadows. Furthermore, this technique definitely provides an inspiration for the characterization of little characters.

Keywords: little characters, characterization, *Ode to My Father*, the Hero's Journey, self

1. Introduction

Characterization is the core and soul of cinemas. With the increasing focus on the little people, the portrayal of minor characters has dominated film market. It is a challenge for creators and a subject of urgent research for academics to create flesh and blood individuals, rather than symbolic and blank characters. The current research on the portrayal of little characters can be divided into three types. The first is partly "an analysis of the main characters in recent realist films", with a diverse analysis of characterization from a type of fixed characters.

The second is "to explore the portrayal of little characters with film and television creators through conversations with the directors." The third is some strategies for minor characters' portrayal proposed by some scholars who analyse the types, characteristics and values of little characters by combining these protagonists with genre films and the characteristics of realistic films.

Among them, "Study on the Creation of Characters in Domestic Small Character Films" has proposed to shape the characteristic of little characters, but only from character shapes,

actions and language. In “The Image Construction of little people in realistic film scripts”, strategies for constructing the image of little characters are provided in terms of the creative ideas of collage, attention to detail, and empathy evoked in the audience. It can be seen from these papers that most of the suggestions for the shape of little characters in films are based on external images such as shape, movement and language, or on macroscopic creative thinking such as attention to life or details. In light of the narratology’ classification of characterization, most of the current research focuses on the construction of functional characters but neglects that of psychological characters, which means it lacks attention to the inner activities and character traits of characters. For another thing, “the rapid development of little-character films has, to a certain extent, demonstrated the self-cultural awakening of Chinese film audiences and the mapping of their own values in film viewing.” In some degree, it also reflects the audiences’ search for self-identity or meaning.

From the perspective of individual character’s development, the focus on the personal awakening of little characters and their growth in personality can not only enrich the perspective of film characterization, but also provide creative ideas for the portrayal of little characters. Based on a real-life event in history, *Ode to My Father*, as a Korean film for millions of viewers, reflects the changes in history from a little character’s experience. From the perspective of analytical psychology and the basis on Carl Gustav Jung’s theory of self, the film’s protagonist’s spiritual growth is explored within the framework of the Hero’s Journey narrative. And analyzed is the technique in characterization which successfully strikes a chord among the audiences, strengthened by the little man’s real human nature.

2. The Hero’s Journey and Jung’s Theory of Self

The hero’s journey is a universal model and serves as a skeletal framework with infinite elasticity allowing for endless variations without losing the charm of the story. The hero symbolizes the soul in transition and the path that each individual must take in life, and the journey is made up by all of the stages of life and growth on the life road. The struggle for personal integrity and spiritual unity endows the characters with more humanity and

authenticity.

2.1 The Hero’s Journey

There is a universal single myth structure to a widely used narrative model of play-writing. The single myth was central to Joseph Campbell’s beliefs, who firmly believed in the existence of a universal myth throughout human history, a being that transcended the story itself. Having studied myths and legends around the world in the context of modern psychology, Campbell argues that all narratives follow the pattern of ancient myths, in which the hero leaves his comfortable, uneventful place to venture into a strange and challenging world. It is both an external journey, an adventure to a definite place, and an internal journey, a journey in the inner, spiritual realm. Thus, a Hero’s Journey narrative model, proposed by Christopher Vogler, a famous American screenwriter, has become a common narrative guiding tool in film production. In the normal pattern exist heroic journeys and character archetypes. This mythic structure is a homogeneous cultural form that, regardless of the differences in character, plot and setting, implies a common structure in which the hero grows and changes after undergoing a journey of initiation, enlightenment and return.

Moreover, more than a meta-story structure, the hero’s journey is about a common quest for self-inquiry and self-transformation. “One is the ancient obsession with spirituality, while the other is the modern search for identity.” Joseph Campbell argues that the determination to become oneself is a heroic act thus in this sense every individual is a hero. Therefore, researching the story of a little character and exploring his inner growth from the perspective of the hero’s journey, the narrative would become more tense and more distinct and vivid characters would be shaped with combination of the ordinary life of the protagonist with his adventurous journey. Back to the film *Ode to My Father*, the protagonist is placed into the model of the hero’s journey, from which several moments are selected to show the audience Deok-su’s entire life. His fighting for his family and his constant search for his identity endow the whole story with a legendary charm.

2.2 Jung’s Theory of Self

According to Jung, the personality as a whole is called the Psyche, which includes all thoughts, feelings and actions and consists of the

consciousness, the individual subconscious and the collective subconscious. Consciousness means the mental activity that is directly perceived in the mind, such as thoughts, emotions, feelings, intuition, etc., and aims to provide a deeper insight into the individual's development and self-knowledge.

But Jung believed that most of what constitutes the mental world is subconscious, which means what is not consciously perceived by the individual. Some of them is the product of individual and cultural experience, the content of the individual subconscious, such as that which is repressed, painful and forgotten but recalled. Others are common to all human beings, the so-called collective subconscious. It consists mainly of archetypes and instincts that drive human's behaviour without awareness of the real motives behind it, because they are hidden deep within the human mind. Based on these division, Jung regarded instincts as physical internal drives determined by the subconscious, with shadows, personality masks, anima, animus and the self as the main archetypes.

The self, as the central archetype in the collective subconscious, assumes the function of attracting, organizing and unifying other archetypes such as the personality mask, the shadow, the anima and the animus. While individuation, as a process of personality development, is a personal inner experience and a quest for self-realization, which means "the achievement of a complete and integrated personality through the integration of conscious and subconscious contents". Self-actualization or individualization as Jung called it, is the highest goal that one strives for throughout one's life. The hero's journey is a process where the hero quest for self-transformation and his spiritual growth. From this perspective, the film *Ode to My Father* tells the story of the hero, Deok-su's ordinary life, showing the conflict and growth within the character, also the conflict between "the elder" and "the self". He strives to explore the balance between "living for the family" and "living for the self" to reach his inner peace and unity of character. Characterization is the soul and core of a film, and the shaping of a character occupies the visual centre of a story space, concealing the logic and deeper meaning of the story. The unique personality of a little character is the only way to convey emotions effectively, so when the developing inner experience of a

little character be fully revealed in a film, the little character will exceed its limitation of insignificance and arouse even activate his heroic attributes.

3. The Departure: The Shadow of Deok-su and the Mask of Personality

The first step for a hero's journey is to move the hero from his normal, ordinary lives in the real world to a new one full of fantastic adventures. It is both an external and internal journey for the hero leaving the comfort and humdrum of life and venturing into a strange world filled of challenges. As Robert McKee said that good storytelling requires the creation of meaningful change in the characters' life situations, and this change is expressed and experienced in terms of a value, a load of values with a binary quality that can be readily reversed in all human experience, such as moral good and evil, ethical right and wrong, or simply the hope and despair of pure value. As in all heroic narratives, the hero's life is transformed on a journey, from despair to hope, from weakness to strength, from stupidity to wisdom, from love to hate to love again. The protagonist in *Ode to My Father* encounters the shadows of his life on the road to escape and is forced to transform his role from that of a carefree child to that of the "head of the family", willing to sacrifice his whole life for his family.

Then Deok-su's shadow should be discussed. According to Jung, the shadow is a negative aspect of the personality that is repressed during development and pushed into the subconscious realm of the individual, consisting of some psychological content that the individual refuses to reveal. In the film, Deok-su is forced to accept the call to adventure and set out a journey of refuge with his family as a result of the war. In the course of his climbing over the ship, he experiences what Joseph Campbell calls the "belly of the whale", "the incarnation of the womb, the belly of the whale, which symbolizes the place of rebirth throughout the world. Without the power to conquer or tame the valve, heroes are swallowed into the unknown and almost die."

This finds its representation in the first real danger of the journey. As Deok-su is climbing over the ropes with his sister on his back, she is pushed off the ship by a crowd of people and disappears. To seek his daughter, Deok-su's father have no choice but to return to the ship.

Before getting off the boat, putting his clothes on Deok-su's body, Deok-su's father orders him that from now on he would be the head of the family and must take the responsibility of taking care of his mother, brother and sister. This promise symbolizes his complete departure from the life before, and pushes him to accept this ritual handover from child to adult in a very short space of time. After this journey, Deok-su will undoubtedly enter a new and unfamiliar world. As the ship sets out, the family is forced to be separated from their father and sister with crying, which has been repressed thought his whole life. In conclusion, "his loss of his sister, which led to the separation of his family", is a lifelong obsession that has become a stubborn shadow in the development of Deok-su's personality.

Then comes to Deok-su's personality mask. A personality mask is thought to be an innate archetypal representation of a person's personality that is socially acceptable and consistent with the concept of how a person should behave in public. That means it is determined by the preferences of others and couldn't reflect the person's true nature. In this sense, the personality mask is a product of compromise in relation to the person's basic individuality. Under the guilt shadow of "losing his sister and separating his father from his family", Deok-su willingly puts on the personality mask of the "eldest" and instills himself with the value of sacrificing for his family for the rest of his life. This could be proved from the fact that he, voluntarily giving up his own pursuit of university education, spends his life earning money to support his younger brother at university, to prepare his sister's wedding dowry and to work to improve the family's living conditions.

The protagonist of each story is the hero of the journey who constantly seek for his identity, wholeness in his own mind. While in the process of perfecting oneself, drawbacks humanize the characters and becomes the starting point for his growth and development. In the film, the protagonist attributes the separation of the family as his own reason and safeguards himself with the belief that he should make living for his family. In contrary, it's shameful and extravagant to be living for himself as he doesn't deserve it, which leads to a drawback in Deok-su's personality. Thus, in the hero's journey that follows, he struggles with his personality

problems, reclaims himself and regains his integrity, making this character more realistic and vivid.

4. Enlightenment: The Conflict Between the "Elder" and the Self

The second part of the hero's narrative is enlightenment. Naturally taking on new challenges, the hero chooses to be partners or enemies with others and gets familiar with the rules of the new world. In this phase, the hero inevitably faces the greatest fears of his life, that is the trials and tribulations of life and death. Undoubtedly, the ordeal is a crucial factor in all stories, in which the hero can be reborn through death or a narrow escape. The hero would become more attractive as a reward for surviving the ordeal or is received an emotional plot to celebrate his victory in many stories.

At the same time the hero reaches a new level of awareness to overcome his tragic flaws and gain a new understanding of himself. This new awareness refers to the change what Robert McKee mentioned, which is often accomplished through conflict, either within the individual, with society, or with nature. Further, the meaning aroused from these changes out of conflict will be conveyed to the viewers. In the film, wearing the mask of the "elder" persona and embarking on three adventures, Deok-su releases the energy of his trapped shadows in each dangerous situation. And his sense of self-awareness is awakened slowly in the intense conflict between the "elder for the family" and the "individual search of selfhood".

Self-awareness is awakened in the midst of trials and tribulations with the aid of the meeting with a goddess. In order to send his younger brother to school, Deok-su goes to Germany to work as a miner. After enduring a life of inhuman absenteeism with a strong will, he meets the "goddess" Young-ja, which follows the path of the hero's journey. As mentioned in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, the protagonist will meet and is attracted by a character, usually of the opposite sex, who has complementary qualities that the hero lacks, namely Jung's Anima. By combining with these complementary qualities, the hero can grow into a unified person. The conversation between Deok-su and his father in the midst of a life-and-death mine disaster suggests that deep in his heart, in addition to his attachment to his family, there is a part of his individual consciousness that is awakening,

namely his attachment to Young-ja. Nevertheless, the newly emerged sense of individuality is unable to shake the powerful shadows within him. When the miner's work term is expired, Deok-su is faced with the choice between love and affection, and the inner conflict between himself and the "head of the family". Lastly, he chooses to fulfill his commitment to go back. Contrarily, due to pregnancy, the courageous and independent Young-ja comes to Korea to find Deok-su eventually, indirectly serving a factor that complete the awakening of Deok-su's personality.

In the end, Deok-su decides to face up to the shadows and seek his inner reconciliation. Some psychic energies are hidden in the subconscious, but they never go away. When conditions are allowed, the psychic energy can be released from the complex and push the individual to enter into problem-solving activities. For his sister's marriage, Deok-su, who has become a husband and a father, once again goes on a journey to Vietnam under the mask of the "elder" personality. In an unintentional attempt to save the local villagers, Deok-su comes face to face with the shadow of "losing his sister" and eventually saves a little boy sister at the cost of a leg, which shakes the shadow inside slightly. But the expectation of the appearance of her father and sister remains in Deok-su's personal subconscious. With this hope, Deok-su sets out on a journey to Seoul to seek his family members. The public recollections of the loss of his father and sister on television release the repressed experiences that have been buried in his subconscious. Luckily, a television link with his sister in the United States resolves partially Deok-su's shadow and gradually completed his personality. However, the guilt of his father, or the desire for his father's approval, still holds Deok-su in its grip. At this stage, as Joseph Campbell writes, the heroes are confronted with a figure who has a degree of control over their lives and represents the authority, which role usually is played by the hero's father. Only somehow defeating or gaining the approval of can the hero grow into a mature person.

5. The Return: Self-Reconciliation

The destination of the hero's journey is the return. Before returning to the normal world, the hero must undergo one more test to prove his ability to return and to be reborn as a new man with fresh insight. Nonetheless, when coming back, the hero's journey would be meaningless if

he does not bring back the panacea from his extraordinary world, which is thought to be love, freedom, wisdom or knowledge. Once the ordinary life has been conquered, the hero will no longer have to worry about the future or regret the past, but will be able to live in the present without being influenced by what is happening around him, achieving a kind of inner harmony, as Jung called, the realization of the self of the personality. The Self means the integrity of the individual mind and the centre of control of the collective subconscious, which includes all aspects of the subconscious and plays a role in integrating and stabilizing the entire personality structure.

In the film, Deok-su spends his life running around for his family in the guise of the "elder". In the end, he lives up to his father's wishes and makes a good living for the family, but his insistence on the shop makes him a strange man in the eyes of others around him. His insistence on not selling the shop can be traced back to the forced departure scene in which his father asks him to open a shop in the international market and he still holds the belief in his father's return. Therefore, in this shadow Deok-su's personality remains and haunted his inner thought. In the last scene of the film, sitting on the rooftop looking into the distance, Deok-su and Young-ja are talking about selling the shop, soliloquizing it's too old for his father to come back. This also suggests that the protagonist has finally let go of his inner obsessions, reconciled with his ego and completed the individuation of his personality.

Generally, the hero's journey is a well-established mode of play-writing and is often employed in heroic narratives, especially in Hollywood's superhero films. However, in the wake of the popularization of heroes, the retelling from the perspective of the hero's journey strengthens the story of the ordinary man with vividness and legendariness. The meaning of the hero's journey lies in the quest for self-transformation, and the realization of one's own nature, which is called individuation, is the highest goal that one strives for in life. Therefore, infused the hero's journey with the inner growth of the characters, a unique personality is created to arouse the audience's empathy by showing their search for selves. As Robert McKee believes that the protagonist in a story must be empathetic, it is a common humanity in the heart of the protagonist found by the audience that touches their heart.

The “insignificance” of these characters in films gives them an intimacy, as the audience concerns more about stories about real, ordinary people. Real characters, like real people, are a unique combination of many qualities and psychological drives, not a single quality. And the more contradictory some of these combinations are, the better the effect be. A character made up of conflicting motivations, such as trust and doubt, hope and despair, becomes more realistic and vivid than a character with a single dull characteristic. In conclusion, the growth of the characters’ personalities in the Hero’s Journey helps to reveal the multifaceted, specific and complex nature of the characters, to achieve a deeper integration of characterization and narrative, further to create humanized and vivid images of these little characters.

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