

พัฒนาการของตัวละครเอกผ่านแนวคิด “การผจญภัยของวีรบุรุษ” ในภาพยนตร์ เรื่อง “ชีวิตพิศวงของ วอลเตอร์ มิตตี้” ภาพยนตร์ปี พ.ศ. 2556

Portrayal of Character Development Through “The Hero’s Journey” in the Ben Stiller’s *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (2013 film)

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อวิเคราะห์พัฒนาการของตัวละครเอกในภาพยนตร์ ชีวิตพิศวงของ วอลเตอร์มิตตี้ ซึ่งดัดแปลงมาจากเรื่องสั้นของ เจมส์ เฮอร์เบอร์ ในปี ค.ศ. 1939 โดยใช้แนวคิด “เส้นทางของวีรบุรุษ” ตามแนวคิดของคริสโตเฟอร์ โวกเลอร์ ซึ่งใช้ในการวิเคราะห์การเขียนบทภาพยนตร์ ผลการศึกษาแสดงให้เห็นว่าการเดินทางของตัวละครเอกในบทภาพยนตร์เรื่อง ชีวิตพิศวงของ วอลเตอร์ มิตตี้ มีการเดินทางผ่านทุกขั้นตอนของ “การผจญภัยของวีรบุรุษ” ตั้งแต่ “โลกปกติ” จนถึงขั้นตอนสุดท้าย “การกลับมาพร้อมภาน้ำอมฤต” ดังนั้น การผจญภัยในเรื่องนี้ส่งผลต่อบุคลิกภาพของตัวละครทั้งด้านร่างกายและจิตใจ สรุปได้ว่า ในภาพยนตร์ชีวิตพิศวงของ วอลเตอร์ มิตตี้ แสดงให้เห็นถึงการเปลี่ยนแปลงของตัวละครจากคนขี้อายที่มักจะฝันกลางวันเป็นคนกล้าหาญในช่วงสุดท้ายของเรื่อง การศึกษานี้แสดงให้เห็นว่าผู้เขียนบทภาพยนตร์ได้ใช้โครงสร้างการเล่าเรื่องของ สอดคล้องกับแนวคิดของคริสโตเฟอร์ โวกเลอร์ ในบทภาพยนตร์เรื่องนี้ด้วย

คำสำคัญ: ชีวิตพิศวงของ วอลเตอร์ มิตตี้, การผจญภัยของวีรบุรุษ, พัฒนาการของตัวละคร, การวิเคราะห์

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ภาพยนตร์

Abstract

This article aims to analyze the development of the protagonist in the movie “*The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*” (2013), which adapted from James Thurber’s 1939 short story. The study uses the concept of “The Hero’s Journey,” as mentioned by Vogler (2007) to analyze the film’s scriptwriting. The results demonstrate that the protagonist’s journey portrays all stages of the Hero’s Journey, starting from the “Call to Adventure” to the final stage, “Return with the Elixir.” Consequently, the journey in the story impacts the protagonist’s physical and mental characteristics. In conclusion, “*The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*” (2013) shows the movie script of transforming a timid daydreamer into a courageous man. This study confirm that the movie’s scriptwriter corresponds to Vogler’s narrative framework.

Keywords: The Secret Life of Walter Mitty, hero’s journey, character development, film analysis

Introduction

Film is considered a media that reaches people all over the world. Several movies are made abroad with the aim of conducting people know and understand different cultures. Therefore, movies can be seen as a tool for communicating thoughts and feelings, as same as novels, songs, poems, and other forms of expression (Burinprakhon & Maporn, 2022). Messages are often embedded in such media and entertainment platform which aim to engage audiences. Sometimes, these media include elements designed to influence audience behavior. Additionally, movies and other media are sometimes used as tools to stimulate political thought or persuade people for business purposes, for example political issues were portrayed in Italian cartoon (Baldi, 2024).

Since the first movie were release 1895, the film industry has significant growth and innovation. Movies can be divided in various genres, including drama, comedy, action, and science fiction, each type contains unique storytelling techniques that offer distinct experiences to audiences. Technologies such as CGI and 3D have further enhanced the audience’s experience. One interesting genre is movies based on novels which contain process of transforming written text from the book into visual stories (Leitch, 2009). Sometime the movie’s scriptwriter adds the creative input from directors and filmmakers. This adaptation process often involves character development, plot alterations, and thematic emphasis, or other techniques to fit the cinematic platform.

Ben Stiller’s The Secret Life of Walter Mitty (2013 film) is a movie categorized as adventure, comedy, and drama (IMDB, 2013) that includes adventure, comedy, and drama. The storyline were based on *James Thurber’s* short story in the year 1939. The income of

the movie was 188 million USD according to Nash Information Service (2016). It won the prize of The 85th National Board of Review Awards in 2013. This movie plot is an imaginative daydreamer, Walter Mitty (the protagonist), frequently escaped his boring life as a worker at the magazine company, by immersing himself in fantasies of heroism, romance, and action. However, when his job was at risk, he decided to take real-world action. This led him on a global adventure that surpassed his wildest dreams, which also change his life and his mentality into an extraordinary journey.

Even though this movie contains several points to study such as cinematic techniques, adaptation from literature, and cultural and social commentary, this study focuses on character development. One of the famous framework is Vogler (2007) framework which describes how the protagonist transforms from a timid, ordinary man to an adventurous and confident man provides an image of character arcs and personal growth. Studying this movie through the lens of character development is significant because it offers human psychology which is inserted in the movie. The protagonist's journey from a passive daydreamer to an active man reflects the psychological processes that can change one man. Another significant is to know how the filmmaker uses character development strategies and heroic journeys to emotionally resonate with the audience. The protagonist's struggles including self-doubt and his desire

for a more fulfilling life in a big city may relate to several audiences. Analyzing this character development may provide self-discovery, courage, and the pursuit of happiness.

Purpose of the study

This study aims to study the main character development in Ben Stiller's "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" (2013 film) using the approach of Vogler's (2007) Hero's Journey.

Literature review

The related researches from academic database such as Google Scholar can be divided into two parts. The first part is the studies related to this movie since it was released in 2013. Starting with the success of the protagonist was reflected in the movie using narrative and cinematic elements, and employed social-psychological approaches (Pujianto, 2015). Then, Fandika et al. (2020) analyze the moral value of the main character in this movie. The research found that one of the most values of the protagonist was confidence. The second part is the studies of the movie by Vogler's (2007) Hero's Journey theory.

There were some researches from Indonesia that reported the framework has been adopted in several movies such as Rango, (Sholeh, 2024), Aquaman (Fandika et al., 2021), and Moana (Awwalina, 2018). Those movies portray the hero journey of the protagonist through the story. Moreover, Thai researchers have studied prominent films such as the top-ranked box office movie "Avatar" (Chaiklam, 2023) as well as one of the famous

animated musical fantasy films “Frozen II” (Chaiklam, 2021). Research in the Asian region has also examined novels such as the Chinese novel “The Untamed Series” (Chaiwongsa et al., 2021) and the Thai literature “Phra Sang” (Saeng-arunchalaemsuk, 2018). These studies show the integration of heroic steps in both literature and film scripts. Two primary theories were identified including, Vogler’s (2007) hero’s journey and Joseph Campbell’s monomyth (Campbell, 2014). These studies reveal that not all 12 steps of the Hero’s Journey were presented in each movie, the nature and frequency of each step can vary according to the theme of each movie. Vogler’s theory is popular among researchers. However, even though Ben Stiller’s “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” (2013 film) has been already analyzed by some theories (Pujianto, 2015; Fandika et al. (2020), there seems to be a gap in the application of Vogler’s (2007) theory to this film. Therefore, this study aims to study the main character development in Ben Stiller’s “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” (2013 film) using the approach of Vogler’s (2007) Hero’s Journey.

Methodology

To study the presentation of the Hero’s Journey in *Ben Stiller’s “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty”* (2013 film), the researcher conducted the following steps:

1. Literature Review: The researchers studied documents and research related to Christopher Vogler’s (2007) and related theories such as Campbell’s (2014) approach to ana-

lyzing the Hero’s Journey in films. Finally, the researcher selected Vogler’s (2007) theory which was recently used in 2024.

2. Data Collection: The researchers gathered information by studying the film *Ben Stiller’s “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty”* (2013 film) from watching the movie via Amazon.com. The audio script were also extracted throughout the story.

3. Data Analysis: The researchers analyzed the film *Ben Stiller’s “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty”* (2013 film) using Christopher Vogler’s approach. This analysis follows the 12 steps in Vogler’s book “The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers” (Vogler, 2007).

4. Discussion: The researchers summarized the key findings of the study according to the purpose of the study.

5. Conclusion: The researchers provide conclusion of the study. Then make a comparison between previous studies as well as highlight the limitations of the study.

Theoretical Framework

According to Vogler (2007) who proposed a theory on the movie storyline, including 12 steps. There are as follows:

1. Ordinary World: The story will introduce a protagonist in his/her ordinary world.

2. The Call to Adventure: The protagonist will encounter a crucial problem, challenge, or adventure. The problem will require some actions from the protagonist. It will be impossible for the protagonist to stay in the ordinary world anymore.

3. Refusal of the Call: After the protagonist has faced the problem, the protagonist may refuse to do some action.

4. Meeting with the Mentor: The protagonist will meet someone who provides suggestions or pushes them to do something as a mentor.

5. Crossing the First Threshold: The protagonist will commit to the adventure. The protagonist is now ready to face the problem.

6. Tests, Allies, Enemies: After the stage of crossing the threshold, the protagonist will deal with challenges and tests, as well as meet allies and enemies along the path.

7. Approach to the Inmost Cave: The protagonist will get into a dangerous place. It is often portrayed in the underground, jungle, and mountain. The mission's goal will be hidden inside.

8. The Ordeal: The protagonist will confront the greatest fear. Sometimes comes with the possibility of death.

9. Reward: After the ordeal, the protagonist will survive and get a reward. It can be a special weapon, knowledge, or reconciliation with the enemy.

10. The Road Back: The protagonist will come back to the ordinary world for some reasons.

11. Resurrection: The protagonist will pass the final tough time in the story. It symbolizes a rebirth.

12. Return with the Elixir: The protagonist will return to the ordinary world with something that can be symbolized as an elixir. It can be treasure or knowledge gained

from the adventure. Finally, the result of the study will be presented in a descriptive method.

Result

The adventure of the hero in the film *Ben Stiller's "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty"* was analyzed by the researcher. The story follows the Hero's Journey steps as mentioned by Christopher Vogler. All 12 steps have been presented in the storyline. Those steps include:

1. Ordinary World: The protagonist Walter Mitty is presented as an introverted man who works in a big city in Life Magazine Company. His job is in the negative assets department where he has to sit in the room and work with adventurous images captured from field photographers. The protagonist always daydreams of exciting adventures according to the images contrasting with his current mundane life.

2. The Call to Adventure: The situation happened when his magazine company is in the transition to change from a printed version to an online version which meant his work in a negative department is at risk. Moreover, the image for the last cover of the last printed-out issue (Negative #25) from the photographer named Sean O'Connell was lost. The big problem is no one could contact Mr. O'Connell. He does not have a phone or electronic devices, he only live with a film camera and contact people via mail only. Both situations pressure him to do something. He cannot work as normal as he did anymore.

3. Refusal of the Call: The protagonist does believe that the negative #25 was missing. He tries to find it everywhere in the office because he believe that it has just been dropped somewhere or he could contact Mr. O'Connell to ask. As shown in a dialogue “*Do you maybe have an address for Sean O'Connell*” which portrays that he did not want to leave his comfort zone to do anything more than work as usual.

4. Meeting with the mentor: This story seems different from other heroic movies because the mentor of those movies mostly appeared as an experienced person, master of war, etc. However, in this movie, Walter receives supportive suggestions from co-worker Cheryl Melhoff who has been interested by him. Cheryl encourages him to take the risk and suggests starting a journey to find Sean O'Connell as she mentioned “*I like the motto of the company. Do you know it? “To see the world... “Things dangerous to come to... “To see behind walls.”*”

Then she encourages him to find Mr. O'Connell since they met 16 years ago and she gives moral support with the company layoff issue as she mentioned “*Well, you have nothing to worry about. With the layoffs, I mean.*”

5. Crossing the First Threshold: The transition to leaving his comfort zone happened when he is sitting in a chair in his office. He read the message from Mr. O'Connell about how negative#25 is important. The message also provides a hint of where to find it. Then the protagonist see the hallucination of Mr.

O'Connell beckon to him. Therefore, this scene can be considered as a symbolic theme to do some action. After that, the protagonist gets out of this working room running directly to the airport passing the Life Magazine motto which is a quote from the original novel by Thurber (1939) “*To see the world, things dangerous to come to, to see behind walls, draw closer, to find each other and to feel. That is the purpose of life.*” This part completely changed the flavor of the movie as well as symbolized a pathway to change both the physical and mental of the protagonist from the timid man to the courageous man.

6. Tests, Allies, Enemies: For the test, the protagonist faces numerous physical and emotional tests after he has started his journey. He has to go to unfamiliar places since he landed in Nuuk, Greenland. The scene where the obvious emotional test happen when he was hesitant to jump into the taking-off helicopter with the drunk pilot as mentioned in the storyline:

“Walter: you're just gonna finish your beer... and then fly a machine?”

Pilot: Yeah. I'm kind of nervous about the storm. I just want to get a couple of beers down.

Walter: Okay. I'm not gonna go with you.”

After this conversation, he get a daydream with Cheryl singing a song to support him to go. Finally, he run to the helicopter and get in. So, this scene is obvious

that he has passed the test in his heart because if he had not gotten in the helicopter, he would have failed the duty. After all, the hint in the story proves that Mr. O'Connell is staying at the ship where the helicopter is going.

Allies: Throughout his adventure, Walter receives help from alliances who aid him along his journey. Firstly, with the drunk helicopter pilot who lifts him to the ship in the middle of the ocean, sailors on the ship support him with food and cloth. Then, Icelandic locals help him along the path in Iceland.

Enemy: From the storyline Mr. CEO, Ted Hendricks seems to be his primary mental enemy that he needs to win. Since, Ted has come to the company, he started to sacked several staffs including his friends. Ted always calls the protagonist as a “*dream machine*” which seems to be an insult for the protagonist. Another thing is the protagonist needs to find Negative#25 otherwise he will be sacked. This can be seen in conversation in the initial stage of the story:

“Ted: So next time I see you, I see that picture. Okay? Hey! Dream Machine! Hello? I want proof you heard me.”

Walter: (dissatisfied expression) Next time I see you... You see the picture.”

The protagonist faces some symbolic enemies such as fighting with the drunk man as well as fighting with a shark in the ocean. He also has to run from the erupting volcano Eyjafjallajökull in Iceland, which actu-

ally erupted in in Iceland during 2010 (Bye, 2011). Then on the last journey, he is trekking through the Himalayas which is considered one of the symbolic enemies and treat of him.

7. The Approach to the Inmost Cave: At the final part of the adventure, the protagonist seems closer to Mr. O'Connell and the missing negative#25 which is the aim of this journey. The challenges push him to his limits. During this phase, the story send him to the trekking trail in Himalayas with two local guides, he describe:

“I am given a mountain blessing. We offer mom's cake to the warlords. Conditions testing body and soul. Now at 18,000 feet, my mind drift like the snow”.

After that, the two local guides send sign to him that they will not enter the area where protagonist is going to. Then they bless him for good luck by giving him a local flute. The protagonist standing there and make decision to trek into that area “alone” as he made final mentioned after he enter the area “*I am alone*”. However, he still has deep confident that he can do it as can be implied from the telephone conversation from E-harmony company:

“Todd: Hey, man, where are you now?”

Walter: Himalayas.

Todd: The Himalayas. I love it, that is a kick-ass “Been There

Walter: Todd, I'm gonna keep this short. I have to make oxygen choices. Would you take me off? I can't really swing that \$500 yearly.”

The script shows that the character is confident. He also makes fun by talking about the payment of the membership fees for the company.

8. The Ordeal: This scene happened when the protagonist finally find Mr. O’Connell in the Himalayas. At first, Walter thinks that Mr. O’Connell has been carrying the missing negative#25 with him. His failure reaches peak when Walter realizes the truth that negative #25, which he has risked everything to find was not with Mr. Sean O’Connell. The Negative#25 were attached with brown wallet which Mr. O’Connell sent to him. He already threw the negative #25 away in a trash with a brown wallet. This makes the protagonist get angry with Mr. Sean O’Connell with the statements:

“Walter: I don’t have it anymore. What the hell were you thinking? I mean, I’m sorry, I’ve admired you for a very long time... but that is not a good move, at all, with a valuable negative.”

Sean: Sorry, I just... I thought it would be a playful kind of thing. Playful? see what you’re saying. With the cover, I should have been more straightforward. But can I ask you, I mean, if you don’t mind... what did you do with the wallet?

Walter: Chucked it.”

This scene gives the feeling that the protagonist has lost everything including, money, his job, as well as failure in his duty. He is totally lost to the CEO. Tedd (the true enemy of the story) who assigns him to find

the negative#25.

9. The Reward: This scene comes after he meets Mr. Sean O’Connell. The reward can be considered as the Self-realization of the protagonist. He gains a sense of self-worth and confidence. The journey to find the negative#25 rewarded him to step out of his daydreams.

10. The Road Back: This scene comes after the protagonist has failed in his duty to find Negative#25. He returns to the ordinary world. He has already lost his job due to the magazine’s transition to an online format as well as cannot complete the duty to find Negative25#. He reconnects with Cheryl, the woman he has feelings for. He returns to his everyday life not as the same daydreamer but he has a transformed individual ready to embrace new challenges and opportunities. This can be seen from the conversation at the airport between Mr. Todd Maher, the staff of E-harmony, who comes to help him verify his personal identity:

“Todd: Airport prison, huh?

Walter: Yeah.

Todd: Tell me all about it over a Cinnabon. Come on. How long were you detained for, by the way?

Walter: Like, 17 hours.

Todd: Wow! How’s that Cinnabon taste? Really great.”

11. The Resurrection: Luckily, his mom keeps the wallet from the trash in his rental house, so the protagonist got the nega-

tive25# by luck after a long journey. The climax of the movie comes when the protagonist faces a final proof that he has completely changed after the journey. The protagonist gets into the meeting room and confronts Ted Hendricks, his former boss for the last time. He has the memorable conversation which can be considered as he has already won over Ted:

“Tedd: Hey. Welcome. Wait, I’m sorry, not welcome. Not an employee.”

Walter: There’s the picture Sean wanted. 25. You have two days to print for cover. There’s your quintessence. Do you know our motto? “

Tedd: Life... “I’m lovin’ it?”

Walter: That’s McDonald’s. This thing that you do, Ted... where you come into a place and you push people out. You should know that those people worked really hard to build this magazine. They believed in the motto. And I get it. You got your marching orders... and you have to do what you have to do. But you don’t have to be such a dick.”

Ted has been a source of stress and insecurity for the protagonist throughout the film. After this conversation, the protagonist finally stands up to Ted refusing to be dismissed from the meeting room. This scene portrays his confidence and self-assurance.

12. Return with the Elixir: The elixir in this movie is represented in two ways. Firstly, it is his personal growth and confidence. His

journey has transformed him from a timid daydreamer into someone who takes action and faces challenges. Another thing was the final cover of the last issue of Life magazine from Negative#25. It is a photograph of Walter himself working in his negative department. This can be considered as the recognition of Walter’s contributions which were approved by Tedd, the CEO. He is carrying the symbolic elixir that represents his growth and achievements.

Discussion

The purpose of this study is to analyze the presentation in *Ben Stiller’s “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty (2013)”* film using the approach of Vogler’s (2007) Hero’s Journey. The result showed that the director conveyed all 12 steps, as Christopher Vogler has mentioned that the storyline was influenced by Greek methodology. The protagonist completely changes from a mundane life to a transformative adventure. The storyline is arranged in a clear theoretical order, starting from the first step, “Ordinary World.” Then, the situation is bad, so the hero is forced to come into the “Call to Adventure” stage. The protagonist must find a missing photograph for the final issue of Life magazine; otherwise, he would be sacked from his job. During the journey, the protagonist faces trials and allies, then finally finds his inner strength and the “quintessence of life.” The storyline returns him to the ordinary world where the real enemy, Ted (the CEO), is working. The major findings show that the director

effectively uses the Hero's Journey structure to present the protagonist's growth from a passive dreamer to an active, adventurous person.

The result of the study corresponds with other studies that used the same framework such as *Rango* (Sholeh,2024) and *Frozen II* Chaiklam (2021). Those studies shows that the scriptwriter has completed all stages according the hero' journey consequently. However, this study is different from some research such as *Avatar* (Chaiklam, 2023) a famous adventurous movie with top-ranked box office. *Avatar* contains only 10 steps of a hero journey as well as a Thai movie from Thai literature Pra Sang. The missing steps were the refusal of the call and the road back. From the research applied different frameworks such as study of Arthur Curry in “Aquaman,” (Fandika et al., 2021)'s who applied by Campbell (2014) framework, the storyline did not complete all stages. The “Refusal of the Call” and “The Road Back” were missing stages in some storylines. The possible reasons may be due to the protagonist did not resist the adventure. The protagonist sometimes immediately accepts the adventure without hesitation. Some stories can just skip this stage to maintain focus on other events. The possible reason for the “Road Back” The story might

skip this phase because the hero may completed the mission of claiming victory somewhere else. For example, in *Avatar* Chaikram (2023) Jake cannot get back to where he previously lived because he already declared war with his former commander and completely changed his side to Na'vi, a fictional indigenous species living in the fictional world of Pandora, so his victory happened far away of his home.

Conclusion

From the lens Hero's Journey theory proposed by Vogler (2007), The that *Ben Stiller's The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (2013 film) scriptwriter focuses on the elements and applied this theory effectively. Protagonist has transformed from a timid daydreamer to a confident man which shows in the dialogue throughout the storyline. Walter has growth through 12 steps of hero journey. Finally, the scriptwriter shows the elixir as Self-realization of the protagonist. The end of the story shows his life is achieved through his adventures and he receives acceptance from his enemy, Mr. Tedd by providing the protagonist with a final cover photo of Life magazine. The significance of this study confirms that the application of the Hero's Journey theory to a modern film are timeless nature of the narrative structure.

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