

DEMYSTIFYING A MIRACLE IN THE MOVIE-127 HOURS

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Abstract

The desire to move as a part of an adventure, at the cost of life, simply serves for personal pleasure and self-complacency. However, the hero's journey is not a linear path but a cyclic one and it inevitably comes across to face challenges and resistance that eventually nurtures him to grow with greater knowledge and wisdom. This paper, Danny Boyle directed movie- 127 Hours; based on true story of life, employs the Magic(al) Realism against the backdrop of Joseph Campbell's concept of hero's journey to examine how James Franco starred Aron Ralston, a common man of 27, undergoes a transformation of self-discovery for his ultimate survival, after five days of his unflinching struggle. The struggle was with the boulder that trapped his hand in the deep and distant Bluejohn Canyons of Utah in 2003 while canyoneering. Throughout the course of an ordeal, he regenerates his energy recalling the divine qualities of his son, mother, home, friends as well as his spouse, and resorts to the desperate measures of life. All the imagined reality comes to be true in his real life. Finally, Aron amputates his hand, escapes his fate from the inescapable, and eventually becomes an international icon, a story to be told to the rest of the world. The whole journey of the hero reflects the three stages in general as archetypes-departure, initiation and return, which is common in everyone's life. The journey of Franco is a message of perseverance for the unflinching efforts as to reap success, instead of being helpless and hopeless while facing the boulder like obstacle, s and fighting the ordeal to ascertain one's existence in life.

Keywords: *Hero's journey, Magic (al) Realism, adventure, boulder, amputate, survival, international icon*

Introduction

Directed and produced by Danny Boyle, *127 Hours* is a 2010 biographical survival film that stars James Franco, Kate Mara, Amber Tamblyn and Clémence Poésy. The movie captures the realistic picture of Aron Ralston's autobiography

(2010) - "Between a Rock and a Hard Place." While exploring a remote canyon in Utah, an adventurer named Aron Ralston (James Franco) becomes trapped when a boulder falls on his arm (Ralston, 2010). Over the next five days, Ralston observes his life and considers his options, leading

him to a painful choice: to cut his arm off so that he can extricate himself and try to make his way back to civilization. This study argues how the adventures of the common man allure him from the ordinary world and take him to the special one where there is a complete transformation of heroic self and consciousness only to get victory over death by a miracle. This paper casts aside all the scientific survival concepts, that the hero has had during the fight for his life and death, and sees some mythological connections by virtue of his fantasies or imagined reality that eventually gives him the tremendous strength to sever his own arm only to free himself from the boulder.

The impact of the movie review is reported to have surfaced with panic attack, fainting and nausea in most part of the world. Nevertheless, many are reportedly found to have gained immense confidence as well as psychological strength fighting the dreadful and fatal diseases cancer, aids and the like.

Aron Ralston is a motivational speaker today who still goes hiking in the mountains. He works for several outreach activities campaigns to raise funds for the disabled and rules in the hearts of millions of people with his inspiring journey through the various channels of communication. He is in the public sphere and an icon of popular media.

Setting, Symbols and Magic

The setting of the movie- time, place and action heavily influences the heroic journey, with the archetypal patterns of life and nature, prompting a call for an adventure. The movie begins with the normative life of the outdoors with a young man of 27, starring James Franco. The time he sets off depicts the bad omen as he did not respond to his mother's phone and the trajectory he made on the way was asymmetric. There was no channel of communication, as he even did not take his cell phone. Again, canyoneering needs many precautions, which he did defy including the ration, water and clothes, and it prompts him to face uninvited famine. The way he maneuvered and belittled his checklist put him in danger.

The harrowing canyons are a symbol of mystery and God's grandeur, and this can be perceived as the impending danger for the awaiting hero. The complex formation stands for an arduous task for accomplishment. Although the hero's gestures, movements, and skills were shown so used to mountaineering, yet hiking each time's experience is new, still complex and gullible. Heraclitus asserted in Sophie's World by Gaarder (1995), "Everything flows. Everything is in constant flux and movement, nothing is abiding. Therefore,

we cannot step twice into the same river because when I step into the river for the second time, neither I nor the river are same.” Time and space used up once never returns and every other time is quite new in every situation and thus everything is subject to change.

Similarly, the boulder is metaphor which Ralston (2012), a motivating speaker today recalls in an interview:

For me this was the greatest thing ever that has happened and I use this as the metaphor then that there are boulders in our lives that they are going to fall on us and we make a choice. We choose whether it is going to be a tragedy or whether it might be even blessing (0:48-1:06). Aron considers the boulder as an obstacle in life, which is possible to overcome it with the great will and power. Facing them is a way of life and we should accept them.

Browning (1976) illustrates the magic of the mountain myth in Germany in his poem “The Pied Piper of Hamelin.”

“And we shall see our children
stop!

When, lo, as they reached the
mountain-side,

A wondrous portal opened wide,

As if a cavern was suddenly
hollowed;

And the Piper advanced and the
children followed,

And when all were in to the very
last,

The door in the mountain-side shut
fast.”

No sooner had the children reached by the mountain side than the hole there opened and all of them went inside and disappeared except the lame one who couldn’t reach on time before it was shut. The children were never seen thereafter. This clearly proves that mountain is the metaphorical representation of both shelter, exotic and mysterious place. Putnam (2014) believed that mountains symbolize constancy, eternity, firmness and stillness and the sacred mountain Everest represents the state of consciousness in Nepal

The desolated place, erratic surface, crooked canyons, and brownish red dust symbolize the danger of life in the Bluejohn Canyon in the eastern Wayne County of Utah. The land is about 50 miles away from human civilization which indicates the desolation and delirious for the survival that the hero has to face in the movie as a part of his adventure. The hero’s relentless efforts with the fabricated multi-tool to chip the boulder away with

futile for five days depict the mockery of nature over the nurture. Ironically, man-made objects are always fragile. Man always proposes but God disposes. God is divinely omnipotent, pervasive with the diversity that rests on every tiny object of the nature. The average temperature, that remains from 7 to 16 degree Celsius in the month of April, replicates more of an autumn than of spring. This compels the character to die technically and be reborn with the rejuvenation of the new energy as what Northrop Frye & Denham (2007) compared the season of autumn with tragedy under archetypal criticism in the book-*The Anatomy of Criticism (1957)*. In addition, the bird, raven symbolizes the death of the hero, which is shown to have passed every morning across the trap. Thus, the divine symbols lay the ground for an extraordinary event manifesting divine intervention in human affairs, a miracle to occur. At the end, the hero eventually breaks his bones, cuts his arm off, extricates himself and returns to the ordinary life charismatically.

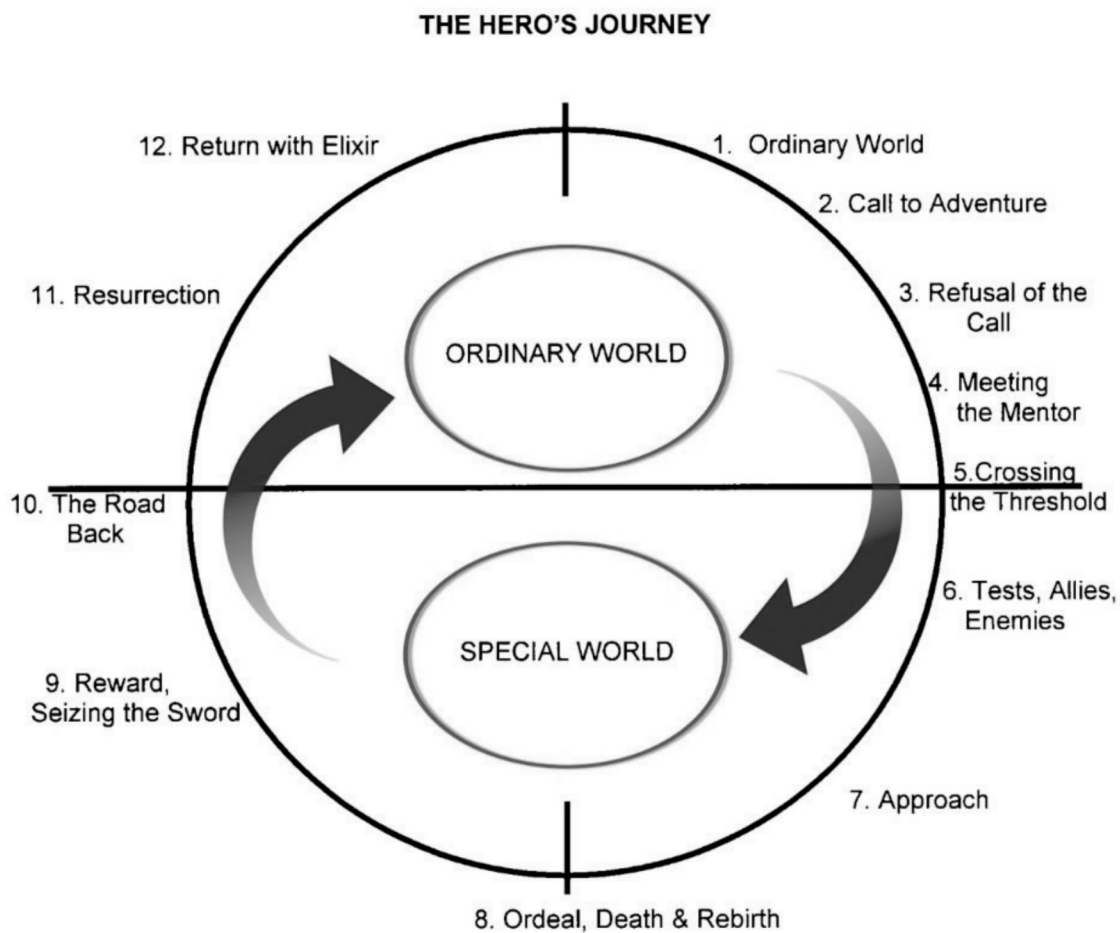
Ordinary World and Special World

For Campbell (2012), heroes have archetypal characteristics and they are the variants of the same hero. Although the journey begins and ends in a hero's

normal world, the quest passes through an unfamiliar world. Indeed, the hero undertakes his physical journey as an active part to solve a problem or achieve a goal. However, the hero's journey is as much an emotional or psychological journey as it is a physical one. A character's actions and decisions in relation to stages can reveal the character arc, or phases of growth that a character experiences during the course of the story. Campbell's model in a consolidated form is illustrated in the figure below:

Campbell (2012) viewed that though thousands of stories, each represents uniquely a mono-myth of the heroic journey and they all spin around the archetypal route of the journey. On the surface level, the activities and behavior might be different from the latent level. Nevertheless, each journey has to face its own resistance with an ordeal in the special world. This is the journey embedded in the human psyche, which applies to every human story rather than mere mythological interpretations. Even sometimes, the inner journey is a voyage from the unconscious to an external adventure of higher existence. Simply put, the inner journey of transformation sums up with the departure, ordeal and return.

Figure 1 Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey (Source: Google)



Magic Realism in the Inner World

Adventure awaits. Call for an adventure is the phase that influences the hero with a desire to move into the inner cave with the inkling of magical happening. In the movie, the hero an avid outdoors- man and experienced mountain climber sets off his adventure on one fine Saturday. However, there is always a choice as to whether or not we accept the call, summoned by the destiny of the underworld. The hero even refuses the call

because in his excitement he tenderly feels some kind of fear and insecurities in the deep and dreadful mysteries of the canyons. Befriending the two girls, he helps them to enjoy the privilege of ecstatic moments in the pool as a mentor. The hero also gets his assistance with the map and his experience. He embarks on a new direction and gets mentored by himself. The mentor could be a physical person, or an object such as a map, a logbook, hieroglyphics or one's inner self. Deep down in the world

there is more to life than this; an exciting adventure waiting for the hero. The topsy-turvy and mysterious canyons are the clear manifestations of stepping into the special world with magical happenings. He has no choice except his passion to conquer them, so he moves ahead. The tip of the iceberg like the hero's external world in the Jungian archetype is impregnated with larger part of the "transcendental imagination" what we call "collective unconscious" which is again the special world for Campbell (2012):

Once having traversed the threshold, the hero moves in a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where he must survive a succession of trials. This is a favorite phase of the myth adventure. It has produced a world literature of miraculous tests and ordeals. The hero is covertly aided by the advice, amulets, and secret agents of the supernatural helper whom he met before his entrance into this region. Or it may be that he here discovers for the first time that there is a benign power everywhere supporting him in his superhuman passage (p.89).

The journey from the known to the unknown is realized when the hero crosses the threshold of the special world. Here he takes a glimpse of the dark world. It is exactly where he witnesses the predicament

of life, which is not the same as what he has experienced before. The hero then attempts to test, ally and resist to the new situation. He could see the challenges, walls and irreducible tensions. Of all the rest, the most important feature that he takes up here is to test his fortitude to overcome the resistance of the ordeal ahead. After becoming trapped, James Franco calculates his options to resolve the situation in the first hour. Initially he becomes numbed to witnessing the different world (127 Hours 16:19-17:05) as the boulder trapped him. He tries to do something on his own He awaits a rescue and cries out for help but all in vain. Then he thinks about chipping away the rock to free his hand that too turns futile. The hero faces the extreme resistance to win his life over death. The lowering temperature ranging from 7 to 17 degree Celsius on an average in the deep and distant canyon freezes him with famine and dehydration. The sunlight is a far cry. On the fifth day, the hero's helplessness is so intense that he is obliged to sip his own urine.

The realization of Nietzsche's nihilistic character, the existential crisis is very much akin to that of the character of Albert Camus's Sisyphus (translated by O' Brien), who condemned by the gods, is bound to roll a boulder up- hill only to have it rolled repeatedly at the bottom each time (Nietzsche, 1872/2011). Without God, we are alone, exposed to a natural

universe devoid of the comforting idea of a God-given purpose to things. According to Nietzsche, this state of nihilism – the idea that life has no meaning or value – cannot be avoided; we must go through it, as frightening and lonely, as that will be. O'Brien translation of Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* (2000) presented the boulder as the metaphorical representation of individual's persistent struggle against the essential absurdity of life. Camus further argued that with the joyful acceptance of the struggle against defeat, the individual gains definition and identity. The absurdity in the movie is evident; the hero attempts to chip away the boulder for twenty hours only to produce the handful of dust powder. It is exactly where the point of departure lays the ground for magic realism. The hero pulls out a camera and starts recording a message to his parents. He even etches his name against the wall and he tops it off with RIP. Nevertheless, he never gives up the hope. As Hemingway (1980) believed that the man is not made for defeat; that he can be destroyed but not defeated in the novel- *The Old man and the Sea*, he perseveres until his last breath without accepting the defeat.

In the hero's journey, it is exactly what fighting the ordeal is. Here you never give up the hope. However, this is only a technical death. Very like James Joyce's "epiphany" in "Araby" mentioned by Rains (2008), Aron has an out- of -body

experience, a miracle and discovers the answer for himself in *127 hours* (Barkham, 2010). In one of his shows, he stated:

I knew even from the very beginning I was gonna have to cut my arm; I don't want to cut my arm off. It is pretty rational response and said dude you are gonna have to cut your arm off today and finally this epiphany comes and that was that it's it! I don't have to cut through the bones. I can use the boulder break the bones and this smile came up in my face, and indeed, it only took me a minute. I pushed down that the bone shattered and I was out of there. I actually did leave myself out of the canyon. I walked out of the canyon and into a living (Inspirational Message 1:18-2:09).

Recalling the child is divine while fighting the death. It is not easy for the hero to sever his arm with earthly power. It may be because of the magical transformation what Kant (2003) called-transcendence, which rejuvenates the energy for his gruesome act of amputation. This is not an ordinary decision that human flesh and blood can endure. It is the acceptance to endure the agonizing pain beyond the mundane life on the earth. It is something of a miracle which qualifies by its name; for miracles do not happen all the times. The recalling of his mother (*127 Hours* 1:09:03), home, and most importantly, his

future child (*127 Hours* 1:13:05) in his fantasy is again much the same like how Welty's hero with unconscious heroism-Phoenix Jackson, in the short story *The Worn Path*. (Eudora Welty, 1998). Here the main character regenerated her energy that she could not wait to resume her journey after the fantasy of her sick grandson. Here the character Phoenix Jackson is compared to a Greek mythical bird- Phoenix- that lives for 500 years, gets burnt, and then springs up with new life out of the ashes again. In both the cases, the magical realism is upper hand while fighting the death. Not only in the film the hero, James Franco, but also in the real life should Aron survive. After againing the new energy, he uses the boulder as an instrument to break his bones and free himself from the canyon. Then, using his blunt penknife, he slowly cuts through his arm. The whole procedure just takes an hour. Ralston (2012), just before he had freed himself, he claimed:

I actually did see myself leave the canyon; walked out of the canyon and into a living room where I saw a little boy; may be three years old, blond hair, red polo shirt playing with a truck Brr...Brr... And then I watched, I myself step into the room and he comes running over to me and I see myself scoop him myself with my left hand and a handless right arm prance around and dance and his eyes just lit up; beautiful

blue eyes-say daddy! It is good to see you I'm glad you are home. Can we play? And then it blinked out and I was back trapped by the boulder, shivering and shuddering and yet that little boy gave me the hope, the courage and strength to get through that (Inspirational Message 2:13-3:10).

The cumulative flashbacks of his parents, spouse, friends and above all his future son all together give a magical strength to overcome the trap that James Franco walks out of body experience. Fishwick (1985) argued that the hero is archetypal, a paradigm who bears the possibilities of life, courage, love –the common place, the indefinable which defines our human lives. He also emphasized on the term “charisma” as the central characteristic of the heroic deed that defies death. Bowers (2013) maintained, “The variety of magical occurrences in magic(al) realist writing includes ghosts, disappearances, miracles, extraordinary talents, and strange atmospheres but does not include the magic as it is found in a magic show.” Bowers puts special emphasis on the extra ordinary situation where imagined reality turns out to be the action.

Similarly, Bhattarai (2007) asserted that word ‘magical’ is related to allegory, surrealism, self-imagination and the word that goes wrong with science fiction. Thus the moment of magic, that provides him the

elixir of epiphany, not only reawakens the dead hero but also transcends the heroic self into some higher existence of knowledge and wisdom. This is the highest point of hero's destiny, facing the biggest challenge that the hero must face. It is the locus of the magic realism, which synchronizes his mind and soul with the rebirth of energy. Disintegration has served as a tool for integration.

Triumphing the Ordeal

After gaining victory over the innermost cave, the hero receives the reward, which is not necessarily a physical object. It could be greater knowledge of higher existence; the world is now like never before, achieved through a magical transformation. The true healing is the achievement of inner change. Reward is potential enough to settle a conflict with a family member, a shadow or soul or even healing trauma, which gives the hero much better understanding of himself and allows him to live a much happier, more fulfilled life. After he receives the reward, a way back the hero is still insecure not yet out of that very terrifying land. He envisions an ordinary life. He realizes the special world must essentially be left behind facing some more hurdles on the way. After he amputates his hand, rappels down some 70 feet, and yet has to struggle to free himself and he walks about eight miles to rescue his life. Enlightened hero, James Franco knows he has to resort to the death and

darkness for life what lies our weakness in giving up while the success comes by the unfailing efforts. The hero uses all the lessons learned on the journey and transforms himself into a new being with new critical tenets of life. He is now such a strong man that even the help offered by the external world is merely futile for the hero already chose life over death.

Finally, the hero returns to the status quo after the transformation is complete. He implements the values that he has learnt and shares the elixir of his experience to implement the change. He uses the adventurous lessons to heal wounds and help others in the ordinary world. The cycle keeps hitting us repeatedly and brings about the miracles in human life. Unless something is brought back from the ordeal in the innermost cave, the hero is doomed to repeat the adventure until the lesson is learnt. Elixir is the metaphor for growth, love, wisdom, freedom or knowledge, which we can use to help others. The xenophobic trope of the people towards him is the manifestation of the substantial change in the hero's transformation both at internal and external level.

Critically viewing, the movie- *127 Hours* produced and directed by Danny Boyle, brings about some alterations to support the theme of adventure. Therefore, the gap can be realized between the film and his autobiography. Ralston's befriending of two young girls in the exposition part

of the canyoneering is a cinematographic glamour. In the real life, Aron teaches them only some climbing moves. The bike is tied to a tree in the cinema but it is tied to itself and left. Similarly, the hero meets the American family while he actually meets Dutch family in the real life. Aron walks about eight miles after he escapes his fate in reality, but the movie shows an alternative ending of it. Although the impact of the movie review is reported to have surfaced with panic attacks, fainting, and nausea in most parts of the world, it has brought his audience home with transforming the new energies into audience with the rejuvenation of battle of life with the most fatal diseases like cancer, AIDS and the like.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the locus of a hero's journey is fighting the death. In the cycle of life's journey, it is inevitable for the hero to descend into a special world where one has to retrieve the treasure after getting a victory over the boulders- like dragons.

The dragon in mythology represents an obstacle and is the metaphor of life. Campbell maintained that the cave we fear to enter holds the treasure to seek. This is the biggest reward and growth with a magical happening. Nevertheless, it is too generalized way to accept it as merely an arduous task based on scientific grounds of reasoning. In the movie, it has been conquered by the grace of supernatural power and charismatic qualities laden within James Franco vis-à-vis the realms of fantasy of his parents, home, spouse and above all his future son. The magic realism lies when James Franco's imagined reality turns out to be true at the end of the movie. From the aesthetic dimension, the movie- *127 Hours* has captured the specificity of sufferings of Aron Ralston (James Franco) and the intensity of trauma, and transmitted that pain to the audience. The redemption of the trauma lies in the happy- ending with a life back. To everyone's surprise, Aron Ralston still goes hiking in the canyons. Adventure awaits and another call for him.

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