

# Interpretation of Protagonist's Growth in Film *I am a Hero* from the Perspective of Bildungsroman

Ning Wang<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of foreign studies, Nanjing University Of Science And Technology, China

**Abstract.** As a kind of coming-of-age story with the theme of narrating the growth of characters, Bildungsroman mainly reflects the protagonist's mental journey after a series of challenging events. This perspective has been widely used by scholars to interpret characters in literary works. This paper creatively applies this perspective to character analysis in Japanese epidemic film *I am a Hero*. The thesis makes an in-depth discussion on the protagonist image in the film from multiple structural elements of the Bildungsroman, such as people guiding the way and spiritual construction of personal consciousness, then analyzes the process of protagonist Hideo's spiritual growth and finally summarize the characteristics of Bildungsroman.

## 1 Introduction

In literary criticism, a Bildungsroman, novel of formation, novel of education, also known as a subset of the coming-of-age story is a literary genre that focuses on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist from youth to adulthood in which character change is extremely important.

According to Abrams' definition of Bildungsroman, the theme is the development of the protagonist's thought and characters[1]. The American Bildungsroman inherited the essence of German Classical Bildungsroman that mainly tells about the cognitive process of young individuals about the external world and their inner self. Due to the limitations of the social system or the lack of family education, these adolescents are forced to live within the framework of the adult world and cannot successfully construct individual subjectivity[2]. It can be seen that characters usually solve their inner confusion by embarking on a journey. With the help of guiders, after experiencing a series of trials and tribulations, he gained an epiphany and began to accept reality.

Zhang sees a strong connection between Bildungsroman and traditional rituals of passage[3]. The results of anthropological research show that, for a long time, adult ritual or the passage ritual specially held for minors has been prevalent among many primitive peoples, the purpose of which is to pass a certain ritual to teenagers who are about to enter the society to fulfill their obligations. Often minors will undergo a series of rigorous ordeals. During the ceremony, these minors will temporarily be separate from the society and taken to a secret place by the elders or wizards in the tribe, where they will undergo various tortures and tests. In this period, they will also learn the myths, history, customs

and moral values of the tribes. When the ceremony is over and they return to the original place to integrate with the society, they seem to have been able to fulfill the duties assigned by the society. Thus, it can be concluded that the original model of the Bildungsroman comes from this ancient ceremony.

To date, Chinese scholars' research on Bildungsroman mainly includes the following aspects: the first aspect involves the development of Bildungsroman in China as well as the discussion and analysis of genre, narrative characteristics, narrative structure and related concepts of Bildungsroman[4-6]; Second, The comparative study of the Bildungsroman from different countries, especially Western countries are involved[7]; The third aspect is much more common among the research which analyzes the characters in literary works from the perspective of the Bildungsroman. Especially the research on the growth of female characters has been increasing in recent decades, which plays an important role in female awakening and independence[8-10].

Different from the previous research, this paper creatively applies Bildungsroman perspective to the analysis of film characters, with the base of similarity between movie works and literary works to a certain extent. From the similarity of languages, both literature and film are arts of language. With the audience watching the film and the reader reading the literary works, these two processes are involved in language communication. There are close connections between the audience and the director, the reader and the author, both of whom are mutually presupposed. Specifically, the author's writing is encoding the language, and the reader's reading is decoding the language. A smooth communication is possible only if the code of language used is well known to each other. The language

\* Corresponding author: 13021959848@163.com

communication between the director and the audience is the same.

From the perspective of literary creation, literary works are more inclined to static descriptions while movies inclined to dynamic descriptions of characters and plots. Similarly, they both have greatly shaped the distinctive personality of the characters and had unique styles to reveal profound ideological connotations. However, the characters created by literary language are not direct, but indirect images, while films create stories with pictures and sound so that the images are always direct and intuitive. Therefore, in the eyes of the audience, the characters have more vivid and three-dimensional images in the visual and auditory sense[11].

*I Am a Hero* is a Japanese zombie manga series written and illustrated by Kengo Hanazawa. The story begins with Hideo Suzuki (Japanese: 鈴木英雄), a 35-year-old manga artist assistant, whose life seems to be stuck around his exhausting but low-paying job, unfulfilled dreams, strange hallucinations and unsatisfying relationships.

One day, the world is shattered by the presence of a disease (nicknamed ZQN) that turns people into homicidal maniacs who resemble and behave like zombies. Armed with only his sporting shotgun, he runs for his life, meeting strangers along the way. For a while, he and his companions struggle to stay alive, while questioning their moral choices. In the end, only three of them remain and drive all the way to the top of Mountain Fuji to be saved.

This film vividly reveals the social life of cities. Many people still retain their previous occupational habits after becoming zombies: The police will still control traffic and the high jumper keeps his own practice of repeated high jumps... These people all have typical Japanese characters, and it is the huge social pressure has made Japan one of the developed countries with the highest suicide rate in the world. A view of the evil sides of many people in the film after transformation is actually a metaphorical epitome of the real society in Japan.

The zombie virus is just an outbreak of the potential bestiality of people. Once the individual's psychological agent repressed by social regulations is released in an extreme way, it will cause serious social conflicts and irreparable losses. It is in such a difficult environment that the cowardly protagonist has become a hero just like his name. His spiritual growth laid the main tone of the film.

## **2 Narrative space under the theme of growth**

This movie is essentially about a person's growth. The protagonist grows up with the outside world, and his own changes reflect the changes of the world itself. In film's narrative, the region (space) plays an irreplaceable role during the protagonist's growth.

Physical space is a space that is presented in material form and can be perceived by human perception, including scenes of human activities. In *Bildungsroman*,

the physical space and the spiritual space of the character are highly interrelated, and the growth of the protagonist cannot be separated from the specific social environment and living area, that is, the physical space[12]. Specifically, in *I am a Hero*, the place where the story takes place is mainly in two regions (spaces): the city of Tokyo and the foot of Mount Fuji.

The background of the story is set in Tokyo, Japan, the most prosperous city in Japan, the center of Japanese manga, and all kinds of people live in this vibrant city and contribute their own vitality. However, a mysterious virus is spreading quietly and wantonly, and all the infected will eventually be transformed into brutal and ruthless zombies. For protagonist Hideo, Tokyo is not just a simple shelter or a venue, but more of a manifestation of its spiritual temperament and cultural connotation formed over the years, a nourishing place for cowardly characters.

Hideo is a caricaturist living in Tokyo. Although the name is "hero", he is a pure loser in life: His comics have never been a blockbuster, and he can only make a living by being an assistant; With his cowardly personality and timidity, he always chooses to escape when encountering problems. Let alone colleagues, even his girlfriend despised him. His cowardly character also paved the way for the reversal of the image.

The climax of the story is set in a sanctuary on the foothills of Mount Fuji. Narrowing spaces and the absence of laws are more able to detect the dark side of human nature. Our weak protagonist did not resist in the face of the threat of force from the crowd, but surrendered his gun obediently. However, in the case of being surrounded by the enemy, he bravely decided to rescue his companion trapped on the roof after a fierce inner struggle. At the end, when besieged by zombies from all directions, Hideo used the remaining ninety-six bullets to save other partners and completed the heroic feat.

In the film, the two spaces have different symbolic meanings, representing two unique social lifestyles and ideological connotations, which play an irreplaceable role in the growth of the protagonist. Switching between the two physical spaces, the protagonist gradually completes the construction of his own independent spiritual space. The key theme of *Bildungsroman* is change. The protagonist is no longer ready-made image, but the image of man in the process of becoming.

From this perspective, the transformation of the physical space from Tokyo to Fuji implies that the protagonist has changed from innocence to maturity, from cowardice to virility. He has formed his personal subjectivity in the transformation of different physical spaces, which is in line with the theme of a *Bildungsroman*. While rushing out of Tokyo to the foot of Mount Fuji, Hideo finally bravely rescued his companions and went to a safe place. The transformation of physical spaces also marks his completion of the construction of a self-independent space.

### 3 “Runaway” and “Guides”

#### 3.1 “Runaway”

A “runaway” commonly refers to someone, especially a child, who leaves home without telling anyone or without permission. Here it will be used to describe protagonists leaving their home and getting on the road, which is regarded as an important part of the growth process, and is the most basic structural element in the film.

Most protagonists in Bildungsroman are tramps to some extent. The film *I am a Hero* absorbs this feature and provides a plot support for the growth of the protagonist. The protagonists are almost always “on the way” to gain inspiration and growth of life.

Strictly speaking, Hideo’s departure was not an active choice. A mysterious virus spreads freely in Tokyo and by the time Hideo Suzuki realized it out of fear, Tokyo was in total chaos. Forced by survival instinct, he started an escape trip to Fuji. It was also during the journey that he gradually cultivated his sense of independence and self-improvement.

#### 3.2 “Guides”

In coming-of-age stories, guides are often connected with people who advise others on how to live and behave. Many characters appear in order to show the way by leading, directing and advising or serves as a model for protagonists, as in a course of conduct. Guide is an important factor in Bildungsroman, and often affects the protagonist’s cognitive attitude towards society and life from different dimensions, so as to guide them to get out of the growing predicament as soon as possible. According to the role played by guides, they are generally divided into two categories: positive guides and negative ones.

##### 3.2.1 Positive guides

Hiromi is a partner who escaped from Tokyo with Hideo. Both of them forged a deep friendship during the escape. Unlike those who previously despised and excluded him, Hiromi gave him more encouragement and affirmation, which aroused his spirit. Completely different from the previous cowardly image, he has been taking good care of Hiromi during the journey, and his sense of responsibility has gradually emerged.

Through a lot of hardships, the two got to the foot of Mount Fuji and met a brave and decisive female Yabu who took them to the safety. There on the roof the men started fights for Hideo’s gun which symbolizes power. In the conflict, Yabu protected the two as a strong ally. Soon, the roof was attacked by zombies and it is at this critical moment, Hideo decided to rescue the two female partners after a fierce struggle in his heart.

In the climax of film, everyone was besieged in the parking lot, facing a number of zombies from all directions, Hiromi’s encouragement, “We’ll be at ease as long as you’re around” proves to be an amazing morale

booster. The admiration and encouragement of the two female characters are in stark contrast to the previous negative comments. It is the recognition and appreciation of the two guides that make Hideo regain his confidence, inspire his inner courage and fighting spirit, and finally fight tenaciously and achieve victory.

##### 3.2.2 Negative guides

The negative guides play an important role in providing negative examples in the growth of the protagonist, forcing him to change himself in the process, motivating him to become more mature, and finally completing the sublimation of his personality.

In the early stage of the film, Hideo has not made any progress in his career, only a comic assistant at the age of 35 and was despised by colleagues and girlfriend. A negative news about a 35-year-old unemployed man was broadcasting in the comic room, and his colleague associated this character in the news with Hideo with a cold and sharp tone. Although Hideo wanted to express his dissatisfaction, owing to the pressure of colleagues and the cowardice of his own character, he could only satisfy himself through imagination.

Because of his mediocrity over the years, the resentment and indignation of his girlfriend that had been accumulated in heart for a long time also vented out: The rookie trophy that the Hideo regarded as a treasure was just “incombustible garbage” in the eyes of his girlfriend; He cannot even make enough money to support family, but had a very costly hobby - shotgun; “It’s no longer a dream. it’s a delusion! Only a few special people can achieve success, Hideo, you are so common and you can’t achieve anything until you die!” These emotional words expressed the extreme disappointment and helplessness of his girlfriend.

The negative emotional value conveyed by these two characters had a negative impact on Hideo’s character building, and the emotional suppression also triggered his sense of resistance. He gradually understood his own shortcomings and had a clearer self-awareness. It is also understood that only by overcoming character defects and getting rid of the shadows of the humanity through fierce inner struggle, can he become a brand-new self.

### 4 Growth Ceremony and Spiritual Epiphany

#### 4.1 Growth Ceremony

Zhang summed up the mode of Bildungsroman as “naive - demoralized - relieved - grown up”[3].

The protagonists in the novel often need to go through ritual of “death” and “rebirth” in the process of growth, and gain their staged achievement through some symbolic event. With experiencing hardships, they may achieve a profound leap in thought. In film *I am a Hero*, escape journey is both a misery and a catalyst for Hideo’s growth. Like rituals of passage, after going through this kind of training and testing, he would

understand the difficulties of life and the responsibilities that he needs to bear, becoming stronger, tougher, and better able to adapt to the society in which he lives. Suffering itself has no particularly great value. What is really valuable is the strong spiritual power that bursts out of people's hearts when facing suffering. It is precisely because of his responsibility and courage to face hardships that he withstood the test of the growth ritual and grew up rapidly.

## 4.2 Spiritual epiphany

A spiritual epiphany is a sudden spiritual awakening, which is of decisive significance to the growth of the protagonist as well as an essential element in the narrative structure in Bildungsroman.

Zhang pointed out that the minors who participate in coming-of-age ceremony are supposed to firstly separate from the group and experience a "symbolic death"[3]. In the film, there is a plot similar to the symbolic death in the traditional adult style, and this has also become an important node of his character transformation.

When Hideo followed the other men on the roof to the underground warehouse to look for food, they encountered a group of zombies. Hideo found a locker as a shelter, with zombies wandering outside. However, when learning that Hiromi and Yabu were besieged on the roof, a fierce inner struggle started: save or not save. The scene that he fought with zombies to death after rushing out of the shelter kept replaying in his mind. Looking at himself in the mirror against the dim light, he began to struggle fiercely in his heart, and finally he chose to rush out to save his teammates without hesitation. The symbolic death made him had a clearer understanding of himself, and the powerful burst out of his heart made him grow up quickly as well.

## 5 Conclusion

*I am a Hero* portrays an inspirational story of an ordinary cowardly caricaturist growing up in face of a sudden zombie crisis and gradually becoming a hero. Different from traditional zombie movies, it is essentially about the growth of a person and the infinite potential and power that an ordinary person bursts out in the face of disasters and crises.

Looking at film *I am a Hero* from the perspective of Bildungsroman, we can in-depth summarize the characteristics of film pattern through the spiritual growth of protagonist. Physical space and spiritual space are closely integrated in the film. The protagonist chooses to "step on a journey" in face of danger and experience suffering and hardships like rituals of passage. With the encouragement and help of "guides", he has achieved qualitative changes in the end. It is spiritual epiphany that finally realized the gorgeous transformation of his life.

In daily life, superheroes like that in Hollywood movies does not exist at all, but only ordinary people of all kinds with dark side of human nature. The film exactly praised the courage and tenacious will of

ordinary people in the face of crisis. Compared with the title of "hero", it is more meaningful to realize personal growth and put a high value on the life.

A coming-of-age story is a growth history of protagonists from individual to social group integration. In real life, growth is a process that everyone has to go through. In this sense, literary works on this topic can provide useful inspiration and reference for solving adolescents' growing confusion and problems. The rich connotation and the growth of the protagonist expressed in the film have more profound practical significance for audience.

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