

THE INITIATION AND TRANSFORMATIONAL PROCESS OF JACK FROST IN PETER RAMSEY'S *RISE OF THE GUARDIANS*

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ABSTRACT

Jack Frost may not be as popular as Santa Claus, Easter Bunny, Sandman, and Tooth Fairy in the tradition of Western fairy tales. However, having observed Peter Ramsey's *Rise of the Guardians*, it is quite 'enlightening' to perceive Jack Frost positioned not only as a mere Hollywood's animated hero, but as complex one. One of the complexities studied in this case resides in the initiation and transformational process he has to undergo. This article overviews the relation between such process and his position as the archetypal hero. Making use archetypal approach, this article intends to explain the issue. The result indicates that his portrayal in the movie as the archetypal hero experiencing archetypal initiation and transformation is influenced by some factors: interaction with other Guardians and children, quest for self-identity, and his relation with nature.

Key words: myths, archetype, initiation, transformation

INTRODUCTION

The roots of fantasy fiction make use of ancient myths, legends, and folk tales. In the Western civilisation, stories of wonders and adventures all way back to Homer's *Odyssey*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Lucius Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*, and also chivalric romances of the Middle Ages. In the Eastern worlds, they draw from grand epic tales such as the *Mahabharata*, and the *Arabian Nights* tales (Kratz as cited in Katherine Fowkes, 2010, p. 15). Peter Ramsey's *Rise of the Guardians* is without exception an animated movie that features mythological figures such as Santa Claus, Easter Bunny, Tooth Fairy, Sandman, and the hero, Jack Frost.

The discussion in this article is particularly concerned with deciphering initiation and transformational process of Jack Frost as one of the "mythologems" in the film narrative. About the mythologem itself, John Izod (2003:218) introduced the term referring to any mythical figures or elements which are used and explored in any narrative forms. In this case, Jack Frost's being a mythologem occurs in the film narrative. It is described how he experiences an initiation and transformational process from indifference to maturity; from no one to someone, to be the archetypal hero.

The significance of the initiation and transformational process is worth-analysing since the two factors have provided

considerable contribution to the development of the film narrative. They solidify the archetypal quality of Jack Frost as the protagonist in the plot level as well as the hero and central figure in the cinematic one. What becomes an urgent question that follows in this article eventually resides in how their significance may uniquely confirm his mythical figure in a slightly “comparable” relation and position with any other mythical figures such as Santa Claus, Easter Bunny, Tooth Fairy, and Sandman. This is indeed about audience perception towards what is going on in the story. There is an abundance of studies and articles on mythical figures in any kinds of narratives. However, the ones concerning Santa Claus, Easter Bunny, Tooth Fairy, Sandman, and Jack Frost are very rare. Interestingly to note, there was a research conducted on the children’s belief on those mythical figures by Manosevitz and Prentice (1976).

NARRATIVE SUMMARY OF *RISE OF THE GUARDIANS*

Rise of the Guardians portrays how Jack Frost joins a group (the Guardians). Jack Frost, unpopular among humans, invisible from them, and untouchable by them, is invited to join the Guardians in order to defeat Pitch and save the children, but he does not want to join the group. He feels that his personality is not suitable for becoming a member of the Guardians. He likes to have fun by creating snow. Snow causes outdoor events to be cancelled. Snow is hated by most people. He does not

like duty and responsibilities. He does not believe that he can do the Guardians' main task which is protecting the children. However, Santa Claus believes that Jack Frost has something in him that makes him worthy of being a Guardian. Throughout the film, Jack Frost struggles to find out whether he deserves to be a Guardian or not. Here, audience is confronted with quest for identity of Jack Frost; who he is that makes him worthy to be part of the Guardians. The film shows Jack Frost's up-and-down experiences to become a member of the Guardians and find his own identity and destiny.

THEORETICAL GROUND

In the journey of one’s life, a person surely would encounter transformation. Everyone may experience changes, whether they are intended or not (Mason, 2012:54). The transformation may materialise in many forms, such as that from childhood to adulthood, a change of jobs, quitting and joining social circles, moving from a place to another place, and many more. Shortly, changes cannot be avoided and frequently illicit some disturbances in both communal and individual life.

Rites of passage function to temper the harmful effects of changes (van Genep, 1999:104). According to Bridges (1980:87-88), rites of passage maintains the social stability of a particular society. By going through rites of passage, new members of certain social status can ease into their new roles easily. Without rites of passage, the society will be in chaos because the new

members will struggle to assert their new social status or resist the status (Hanson, n.d., para.10).

Van Gennep defined rites of passage as “rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position, and age” (Turner, 1987:4). Van Gennep (1999:102) analysed that all types of rituals, whether it is birth, marriage, initiation, or death rituals, have the same sequential components. Every ritual consists of three phases, which are “separation”, “transition”, and “incorporation”. Thus, Van Gennep concluded that all rituals can be categorised under a single term, rites of passage.

The three sequential phases of rites of passage form a typical pattern that always recurs, called “the pattern of rites of passage” (Van Gennep, 1999:106). Initiation rituals are the most common rites of passage. The three phases of rites of passage always occur and are often easily distinguishable in initiation rituals (Hanson, n.d., para.9). Initiation rituals also serve as a mean to gain the feeling of belonging in a group. Initiation rituals serve as the border between members of the group and people outside the group. The new members feel that they have truly become part of the group and feel more prestigious than people outside the group after going through the initiation rituals (Cohen, 2011:304).

The typical pattern of initiation which is often portrayed in stories, regardless of the original culture and time period of the stories, is that of archetypal hero. Making use of archetypal approach, the initiation

archetype can then be analysed in any cultural forms including in literary works and films. This archetypal pattern of initiation is a variation of life cycle of birth-death-rebirth archetype. In this kind of archetypal pattern, the hero undergoes a series of experiences that transform him or her to be socially and spiritually more mature wherein the hero becomes full a full member of a group with all of responsibilities, rights and obligations. Therefore, the kind of initiation process that he or she must undergo comprises three sequential phases: separation, transformation (transition), and return (incorporation) (Guerin et al., 2005:190).

DISCUSSION

Rise of the Guardians is a very interesting animated work wherein portrayal of initiation archetype takes place. It is a 2012 American adventure fantasy animation film directed by Peter Ramsey and produced by Christina Steinberg and Nancy Bernstein. The film is based on a children book series, *The Guardians of Childhood* by William Joyce. *Rise of the Guardians* features voices of famous actors and actresses such as Chris Pine (as Jack Frost), Alec Baldwin (as Santa Claus), Hugh Jackman (as Easter Bunny), Isla Fisher (as Tooth Fairy), Jude Law (as Pitch Black or the Bogeyman) (*Rise of the Guardians*, n.d.).

In the plot level, the film is thematically about virtue versus vice. The virtue party is the Guardians, which at first consists of four characters representing four spirits: Santa Claus (Spirit of Christmas/Joy), Easter

Bunny (Spirit of Easter/New Hope), Tooth Fairy (Spirit of Innocence), and Sandman (Spirit of Good Dream and Wishes). On the other hand, Pitch Black or the Bogeyman becomes the vice party. The guardians' main mission is to protect children; to ensure that the children will always live happily. Yet, the Bogeyman's intention is to get rid of the guardians' influence over children worldwide and put them all under fear and horror (Steinberg, Bernstein, and Ramsey, 2012). The conflicts between those two opposing forces are visually depicted in black and white way. However, when a third party is introduced, that is Jack Frost, then it is seen how those two opposing forces tries to win him over. It means that Jack Frost becomes the battle ground and also the protagonist of the film narrative. This is moment when the complexity of Jack Frost's position is unravelled on his way to be part of the guardians.

From archetypal perspective that is from initiation archetype, the film shows Jack Frost undergoes initiation to become a member of the guardians. The phases that he is to experience are separation, transition, and incorporation. In separation phase, it is said that initiates are separated from the everyday routine of life and their previous social statuses. This can be done by moving the initiates geographically or stripping the initiates from physical markings of their previous selves such clothing, hair and the like (Hanson, n.d., para 3-4). In early parts of the movie, Jack Frost is depicted as a merry-making loner. He is separated from non-fairy world realities wherein people are not aware of his presence. He is like a hollow man for people cannot see and hear him as can be seen in Figure 1.



Figure 1

Jack Frost is a hollow man that no one can see

The guardians may see and recognise him, but they are not very close to him and

neither he is. In fact, Jack Frost and Easter Bunny dislike each other. Jack Frost even

calls Easter Bunny as “real annoying, real grumpy, and really full of himself”. As to Easter Bunny, Jack Frost is considered irresponsible and selfish because he often messes with the egg hunts on the Easter Day. In addition, Jack Frost often makes pranks that he is in the naughty list of Santa Claus.

The narrative develops as he is chosen to be a new member of the guardians who is predicted by the moon to be able to defeat the Pitch Black. However, only by being chosen does not automatically make him a guardian. He has not been separated from his previous nature; a mere snowmaker who only knows about having fun.



Figure 2

Jack Frost is having fun with Jamie in snow track he creates

Jack Frost is hardly aware of the role of a guardian, which is to protect children and to keep their hope, dream and happiness alive. Thereby, he fails to assume the duty of a guardian. He is driven out of the group of the guardians later on when he chooses to act selfish rather than doing what matter most as a guardian. He then separates

himself from other guardians to fulfil his own obsession about knowing his past life, his identity. Jack Frost’s selfish act can actually be interpreted as a success of the Pitch Black to control him, to make the guardian group divided, and to execute his wicked plan freely. He isolates himself in the middle of South Pole, away from anyone.



Figure 3

Jack Frost was beaten by Pitch and he isolated himself in the South Pole

His condition gets even worse as he is defeated by Pitch at the snowy cliff. It then leads him into a complete lost, powerless, ruined dignity and self-confidence (Steinberg et al., 2012). The next phase of initiation is transition or transformation or liminal state. In this phase, the initiates are transformed from the previous social status to a new social status. In this liminal state, the initiates have ambiguous and indeterminate statuses (Turner, 1969:95). They are considered dangerous and vulnerable. Therefore, they are provided with guardians to protect, guide, and instruct them about their new roles later on (Prevos, 2011, para. 6-7). This phase may include trials of pain and stamina, reshaping initiates' identities, and periods of introspection (Hanson, n.d., para. 9). The introspection can be a bridge between past and future to access, respect, and strengthen the initiates' identities (Brenner,

2011, para. 6). Since this state is the state of emptiness that makes experiences look transparent and insubstantial, it is possible for the initiates to realise things in the experiences that are not recognised before (Bridges, 1980:117). The initiates can see their experiences in different perspectives. The transition phase may also include demonstration of skills and exhibition of prowess. In other words, the initiates learn to be strong during this phase (Grimes, 2000:109).

In the movie, the transition phase begins after Jack Frost separates and isolates himself from the guardians and loses his role. When he is in separation, he is accompanied by Baby Tooth. Baby Tooth here acts as a guardian for Jack Frost during this transition phase. Baby Tooth instructs him to look at his past in order to rediscover and strengthen his identity as seen below.



Figure 4

Jack Frost recalls his past memory with the help of Baby Tooth

When looking at his past, Jack Frost realises his own character that is suitable for being a guardian. He understands that he can be the guardian of children because he saved his sister in his previous life. He saved her from falling into a deep frozen lake. Nevertheless, he is aware that he cannot be a good guardian if he cannot

prove himself and others he could fulfil the duty of a guardian. Therefore, he has to demonstrate his skills and abilities. In the scene that follows, it is symbolically depicted by fixing his broken staff. This is the moment when he regains his own power and confidence.



Figure 5

A symbolical shot of Jack Frost gaining his identity and confidence

Afterward, he goes back to fight Pitch Black and protect children. With his newfound goals, he manages to be seen by

children. In addition, from his introspection of the past, he also figures out the way to defeat Pitch and assume his new duty as

the guardian. He realises that his jolly nature has saved his sister by keeping her calm long enough for him to save her. With such a kind of personality, he manages to drive fear caused by Pitch out of children's hearts and therefore, defeat Pitch out of children's hearts and therefore defeat Pitch (Steinberg et al., 2012). In other words, the transformation phase does not change his identity but strengthened it instead, giving it a new meaning.

The last phase of initiation is return or incorporation. In this phase, the initiates are incorporated back into society with new defined identities and social status through

formal ritual procedures (Hanson, n.d., para. 8). A physical marking that signifies the new positions may be given. The procedures also serve as a public announcement that the initiates are now belonged to the new group (Prevos, 2011, para. 8). In the movie, the incorporation phase starts when Jack Frost regains his old staff. The fact that he is visible now to children also signifies this phase. The incorporation phase reaches its prominent moment when the guardians and the children are gathered to witness Jack Frost taking the oath to protect the children and become the guardian.



Figure 6
The final incorporation of Jack Frost as a guardian

Santa Claus officially bestows him the title of a guardian as shown in the following excerpt: "Congratulations, Jack Frost, you are now and forever more, a guardian!" At the end of the story, Jack Frost together with other guardians go back to their "head-quarter" in the North Pole (Steinberg, 2012).

Interestingly, the initiation and transformation of Jack Frost leave a further mark to note. That relates to the use of

nature as the exploited settings in connection with his initiation and transformation. About this, Kryder (as cited in Araneo, 2008) explained as follows:

Kryder argues that accessing the transformative influence of an arche-type, or connecting with nature is a "sacred" process that may lead to "sacred" outcomes. Referring to this process as 'the awakening of the imaginal', she states that

the absence of, or loss of connection with, our subconscious imagination is at the root of the desacralization of our relationship to the world which can translate to one of the causes of our current environ-mental crisis. Kryder believes that that a person's holistic development requires specific identification with an archetype and/or a strong connection with nature. (p.50)

The use of nature for the archetypal hero having transformative process and any other

main characters in this movie is very vivid. In the movie, there are a number of scenes that illustrate such depiction above.

As a case in point, what happens to Jack Frost at the pre-credit sequence wherein he is uplifted by the magical power of the moon describes how the presence of moon possessing natural and magical power has resurrected Jack Frost from death.



Figure 7

The magical power of the moon brings back Jack Frost's life from death and uplifted him to night sky.

The moon has given him a new eternal life which later on audience knows that he is chosen as one of the guardians. Therefore, at this early stage, audience may infer a sort of special or close relationship between Jack Frost and the moon. He is the chosen one who is destined to be a new guardian to save the other guardians and children all over the world.

The moon becomes quite significant as a natural power that is greatly considered by all mythical characters in the movie. To the guardians, the moon is regarded the mother-nature that gives them the power to protect all children in the world, good and naughty ones. Therefore, they all deeply respect it.



Figure 8

The guardians regard the moon as a sacred celestial body.

Unlike the guardians, Pitch or Bogeyman considers the moon as the one that causes his misery; a longing to be

believed by people all over the world as that owned by the guardians.



Figure 9

Pitch blames the moon for causing his misery and being evil.

The Bogeyman is always represented to oppose nature. Yet, it is also nature that takes him away as well as can be seen in

the last scene where all nightmare creatures he has created turn against him, and earth devours him in an abyss.



Figure 10

The end of the Bogeyman; Mother Earth devours him.

CONCLUSION

Initiation, which consists of archetypal patterns of separation, transition, and incorporation, often recurs in narrative forms, including literary and cinematic works. Rise of the Guardians is an example of the case wherein Jack Frost is the central character that undergoes unique initiation and transformational process. The initiation and transformational process are to a certain degree influenced by some factors: interaction with other Guardians and children, quest for self-identity, and his relation with nature. All of them confirm his portrayal in the movie as the archetypal hero experiencing archetypal initiation and transformation.

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