

Character and Decision Meaning Analysis of *The Legend of 1900*

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ABSTRACT

As a masterpiece in the history of film, *The Legend of 1900* describes a unique pianist 1900's life, including his birth, music, love, and decision. Not only the music of the film has high research value, but the historical background of the film fully represents the era of the early 20th century. Plus, its plot stands up to scrutiny. Most of the characters in the film have no archetypes to prove, but they appear to be three-dimensional reality in the cultural context of the early 1900s. All the main characters in the film express their own personality in that dark times, reflecting the certain conflicts between the times and morality. They represent a group of people at that time and use their actions or languages in line with their identities foiled the uniqueness of the protagonist 1900. The shape of characters in it is a large part of the reason why *The Legend of 1900* becomes so popular from years to years. Also, the decision from 1900 is the most ambiguous throughout the whole movie. Therefore, this paper focuses on the personality of each main characters in the film and their importance to shape protagonist 1900 and the meaning of 1900's choice.

Key words: *character, archetype, decision.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Legend of 1900 happens at the beginning of the 1900s, a great navigation era. A lot of Italian chose to migrate to the US through Virginian. Due to second industrial revolution, American cities grew rapidly. Many European consequently wanted to live a new life in that flourished country to gain some profit by doing business. Although American civil war was over and the whole country was reunited, African American still had a low social status. According to the film, all coal workers were African American worked on the lowest cabin of Virginian. A huge disparity occurs in the treatment of different classes of tourists from Virginian, becoming a symbol of the extreme inequality of the society, and the gap between the rich and the poor. In that era, Max Tooney, a witness of the whole story, represents a group of people from the early 1900s till now who move from one place to another for a better life. 1900, a born pianist, is a unique person who stay all his life on board. The girl, who 1900 loved instantly from the moment they met, once made 1900 have the idea of getting off the ship. The girl's dad, who is similar to 1900 in some ways told a story to 1900 so that he wanted to hear the voice of sea. Based on the namesake archetype, Jelly Roll Morton is a typical

example of an African American who has earned recognition from whites through his own efforts.

Moreover, this paper analyzes the reason why 1900 did not get off Virginian in 4 ways, fear, restriction, infinity, and reality or imagination.

2. MAIN CHARACTER ANALYSIS

2.1. Max Tooney

First of all, Max Tooney is the witness or storyteller of the whole story. He represents most of the people from his time till now who keep on the move for a living from all over the world.

In *The Legend of 1900*, during the second round of the piano competition that 1900 was moved by Jelly Roll Morton's *The Crave* and was crying, Max said: "The whole crew bet on you! I put a year's pay on the line and you're crying?"

According to the situation above, different from 1900, He wants fame and money as many common people want. While, what he has but many people that time do not have is his pursuit of his love music. Therefore, he became the best friend to 1900 in Virginian. They can interact with each other about music

and life, to exchange their different ideas. However, Max was destined to get off the ship and return to his old life on land. Max contains common people's pursuit of fame and fortune and also remain joy with 1900 of performing music. As a connection between 1900 and others in the world, He cannot live a life forever on the sea as 1900 does, but he could listen to 1900 and share 1900's story with those who would believe it. His communication with the shop manager in the film is a typical example the author set. It is Max who let people know there is a piece of purity in the world people live in at that turbulent times. Because of existence of Max, the whole story became more realistic. The author says: "First of all, Max is in the process of looking for 1900, describing the current situation; The second clue is 1900's life before the age of 33, which narrates the past situation" [1]. The whole story is divided into two part told by Max. Through a fusion of the two scenarios, audiences watch the film with anxiety about finding 1900 and curiosity about 1900's life, having more sense of identification of 1900 in a more vivid and lively way.

2.2. 1900

Secondly, 1900, the protagonist of the whole story, is lonely, tranquil, and satisfied in his personality. His loneliness is well interpreted by a scene in the film.

In *The Legend of 1900*, at the night, 1900 cannot endure the loneliness and call a woman randomly.

1900: "You do not know me, but I wondered if we might have a little chat."

Singleton, Lee Claire: "A little chat? What are you talking about?"

1900: "About anything you like, weather conditions, anything you choose."

Singleton, Lee Claire: "Go to hell!"

1900: "Hello?"

The reason of his loneliness is from that no one always stay with him can understand what he think about. Even if Max is his friend who can talk about the music they both love, they are destined in two different world. By contrast, 1900 is more like a real person who has mastered his own reality, while Max is like an abstract person who has lost himself in reality [2]. Max belongs to the land, while 1900 is willing to forever stay in Virginian even if he knows the ship will be destructed some day. Due to their different values, 1900's thoughts cannot be fully understand by 1900. Also, He is tranquil, since he does not like to talk too much. Instead, he enjoys the time watching out of the window, staring at the waves dancing with the wind. His social circle is so small that he only has much interaction with a little amount of people. He is satisfied. Accompanied by the piano, the sea is his sustenance. He never complained to

anyone about his life, but he had already get satisfaction from those common and basic things. From the piano competition with Jelly and some usual performance, his talents in piano and wonderful composition in music fascinate all the people on board who listen to his music. Moreover, his quality shaped by the author and director expresses his niceness at that chaotic times or his position in the opposite side of that world. Fortune and fame to him nearly means nothing; Race and social status to him are not the standards to evaluate people.

In *The Legend of 1900* when the officers worked for music company invited 1900 to publish his album,

1900 said: "I won't let my music go anywhere without me!"

According to his words, 1900 does not want his music to be the tools that can help him gain a tremendous amount of fame and money. He lived a life ignoring the fortune and fame. Also, from him, director design some details on 1900 to show his equality. He is a white but raised up by the African American Danny to keep a balance between races. The scene the film described that the workers at the lowest cabin are black shows a brief situation of racial discrimination to audiences. When Jelly came to the cabin the rich stayed at, many of them felt surprised, but 1900 did not. 1900 shows the quality between two races, in stark contrast to social phenomenon at that dark times. In addition, he not only played piano for the rich, but also played for passengers in the lowest cabin. He talked with a man in third-class, and had a crush on a girl also there, forming a big difference between that times that divided classes strictly. At the beginning of 20th century, millions of Italian travel to the US [3].

In *The Legend of 1900* every time Virginian arrived at New York,

Somebody will shout: "America! America!"

According to immigrants' eager, their desire became stronger and stronger for a luxury life, their goals for traveling changing over time. But 1900, he is quiet. His expression is so calm that there is little anger on his face. He is different from all the people at that time; He is in the opposite side of the world.

2.3. Jelly Roll Morton

Thirdly, Jelly Roll Morton, in the film had a piano duel to 1900 and used his extraordinary skills to attract people's attention. Virtually, based on a certain archetype with the same name, an American jazz composer and pianist called Jelly Roll Morton (1890-1941). The film shapes the character consistent with the archetype well. In reality, Jelly's arrogance is as strong as the film expresses that he boasted he had invented jazz in 1902.

In *The Legend of 1900* Jelly Roll Morton said: “Jelly, you were the one who invented jazz! You can afford to buy a first class ticket! You can even buy the ship just by raising your little finger!”

Just like that in the movie, his lies or this kind of arrogance leave bad impression to many people at that time. Also, In reality, he did has a diamond in his tooth [4]. Plus, The song Jelly played in the film that moved 1900 and let him teared is called The Crave, which is precisely played by Jelly Roll Morton and is widely circulated in the music history as a masterpiece. However, there is also some dramatization just lies in that the story describe he into a too negative character, although he showcased his piano skills at the scenes. According to “Jelly Roll Morton’s compositions and performances have been given the high praise by critics and historians of jazz” [5], Jelly Roll Morton’s contribution cannot be underestimated. The dramatization affects the audience’s understanding of his value to music, and some interpretation of his devotion to Jazz. By showing the duel, 1900’s talents in piano and music are greatly indicated. Also, on the contrary to Jelly Roll Morton’s arrogance, 1900’s calm and ignorance of fame and win sets off his uniqueness, leaving impression to the audiences.

2.4. The girl

Fourthly, the girl in the movie represents the niceness, beauty, in 1900’s life. Almost all the films will set a line of representing love, and *The Legend of 1900* is not an exception. With the love, the shape of 1900 can be more stereoscopic and realistic, having the feeling as most people do. 1900 met her when he played piano to record an album, and the girl was combing her hair by the window. 1900 used his music to express his love. According to Xu Hui, “Nineteen hundred explains the most pure romantic love to us. He can be connected with a girl because of the secret of the sea, he can specially create a piano music that belongs to her only for his lover, he can give gifts and say a word to his lover to practice countless times in front of the mirror.” [6]The piano music following the girl becomes soft and smooth, but when he wants to send CD to the girl as a gift, he did not know how to say, even if he practice again and again.

In *The Legend of 1900* when 1900 wanted to send his CD to the girl to express his love to her,

He said: “I’d be really pleased if you would accept...”

The girl: “What?”

He said: “I would like you to accept this small musical token.”

The girl: “Good luck!”

He said: “Thank you. Good luck to you, too!”

The film describes 1900’s love in warm but timid through his words and changes in his music. Because of the girl, 1900 once had the idea to get off the ship and tried to live a life on land, falling in love with her, to live like a normal man.

2.5. The girl’s father

Ultimately, the girl’s father is a reason triggering 1900 to want to get off Virginian. Her dad is similar to 1900 in some way.

In *The Legend of 1900*, a man came to and talked with 1900, saying: “Until a few years ago, my field was the only thing I knew. The world started and ended there in that piece of land. I’d never walked down the main street of a town. Maybe you can not understand that.”

1900 said: “I understand that perfectly.”

The man said: “I came to a hill, I climbed to the top and I saw... My God, the most beautiful thing in my life. The sea! I’d never seen it before. I was like being hit by lightening. Because I heard its voice.”

1900 said: “The voice of the sea?”

The man said: “Yes!”

Both of them have the sense of loneliness and pursuit of hope but one for land, one for sea. Because of the similarity, 1900 also wants to listen to the voice from the sea on land, to know why the voice can let the man refreshed.

3. INTERPRETATION OF MEANING OF 1900’S CHOICE

Therefore, why he did not get off Virginian, even if the ship will be destroyed due to the lack of value? Here are four reasons to explain his decision.

First of all, because of fear, he does not know how to live on land. He born on the sea, sleeping on the bed that swing with the waves. His social is so small on Virginian that he may not know how to communicate with those thousands of millions of strangers on land. He is afraid to leave today’s life to change his lifestyle.

Second, he cannot feel the sense of freedom on land. Li Yuying says “There were only 88 keys, and he could play them with ease and create infinite joy” [7]. That was the way he wanted to live. He cannot play piano to compose wonderful pieces of music any more without any restriction, since the complex temptation might disturb him from immersing in his music world and purity in his heart. There are too many “rules” and “conventions” on land, which restrict 1900 and make the life cannot be the way he want.

Thirdly, according to what he said in the film, he could not see the end of the life on land. That is because everything is changing on land.

In *The Legend of 1900*, at last, he said: “It was not what I saw that stopped me, Max. It was what I did not see. You understand that? What I did not see. In all that sprawling city there was everything except an end. There was no end. What I did not see was where the whole thing came to an end. The end of the world...”

There are too many choices he needs to do on land. If he gets off the ship, what he faced is not only the girl, and music, but also tremendous amount of people in all kinds of situation. Maybe the result is not like what he thought before, falling in love with that girl, having a happy family and keeping play his piano. Instead, he may marry someone he does not love and give up his music by some inevitable factors. All the things on land is infinite, changing infinitely. But in the ship, he can just live a life with his piano with certain amount of people.

Ultimately, interestingly, some people online think that land is like reality, and the sea is like the dream. Since 1900 never gets off the ship, he is imagined by Max to stand in the opposite side of that world; show the lose of the purity in that turbulent society and show Max’s once pursuit of music. It is reasonable in some way. But standing on the society, it is better to believe that in the world humans live, there is one who always pursue the life he want, no matter the race, status, fortune and fame.

4. CONCLUSION

Each character plays its own part in the film, making the whole story stereoscopic. The protagonists play the decisive role in the story, dominating the plots, while some supporting roles foil the protagonists to lighten their unique personality, making the plots more intricate. By interpreting characters’ words and actions and analyzing their stories and characteristics, people can feel more about screenwriter’s design originality and understand what the film wants to reflect better through the details showed in film. They are characters who fill out the whole story and bring the audiences realistic feelings.

AUTHORS’ CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Yasong Dong.

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