

The Initiatory Journey in *Stand by Me*

FUJITA Hideki

I

The life of an individual in any society is made up of a series of passages from one state or status to another. "Life crises" or turning points in life such as birth, puberty, marriage, and death are accompanied by ceremonies which are usually called "rites of initiation." According to the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, the essential purpose of rites of initiation is to "enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well defined"(3). Initiation rites at the time of puberty, in particular, occupy a prominent place in the life of a primitive society. In the puberty initiation, initiates endure a succession of ordeals in passing from childhood to social and spiritual adulthood. They emerge from their ordeals as totally different beings, that is, as complete and responsible adults.

Interestingly, the concept of the initiatory transition from childhood or adolescence to adulthood has had a significant impact on American literary imagination. Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, an American classic, for example, traces the development of the adolescent hero through his initiatory adventures. The preoccupation with the theme of initiation can also be found in such works as Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, Ernest Hemingway's "Nick" stories, Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding*, and J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*.

American films have also been concerned with the motif of initiation. Especially since the 1950s, the decade marked by the emergence of teenage culture, the subject of adolescence has been widely diffused in American films. Experiences at the threshold of maturity are explored by films such as *The Wild One*, *Rebel without a Cause*, *Summer of '42*, and *American Graffiti*.

This study is devoted to Rob Reiner's *Stand by Me*, a film which portrays a two-day

adventurous journey in search of the corpse of a missing boy, made by four twelve-year-old boys. Interestingly, there are obvious parallels between the boys' experience of the journey and the pattern of initiation rites. Genep observes that rites of initiation consist of three distinct phases: separation, transition, and incorporation(10-11). In the phase of separation, the initiate is cut away from the previous environment, a state which is often invested with the image of death; in the phase of transition, he is subject to various ordeals and is also instructed in the myths, moral codes and rituals; in the final phase of incorporation, he is resurrected as a spiritually transformed being(Genep 74-75). *Stand by Me* contains a similar pattern of separation, transition, and incorporation in terms of plot: the boys depart from the town as a familiar world; they are submitted to a series of ordeal-like experiences in the forest as an alien world; and they return to the town as different beings. The study that follows seeks to show that this film revolves around the theme of initiation through the exploration of the journey of the four boys - Gordie, Chris, Teddy, and Vern.

II

In the opening scene of *Stand by Me*, we see middle-aged Gordie sitting in the car, sunk in thought. He gives a glance at the newspaper near at hand, whose headline reads, "Attorney Christopher Chambers Fatally Stabbed in Restaurant." The story then flashbacks to Gordie's boyhood, spent with Chris and the other two boys in Oregon. It is apparent that the death of Chris brings back boyhood memories to Gordie. And the story of the four boys is organized around the memories. Thus, *Stand by Me* is a kind of frame narrative. Gordie-as-narrator relates his boyhood experiences as the inner story in which he functions as a character. Because Gordie-the-narrator is a writer - as early as boyhood, Chris expects him to become a "great writer" and tells him, "You might even write about us guys, if you ever get hard up for material" - this embedded story can be regarded as a novel on which he is working. Indeed, following the close of the framed story, the film cuts to Gordie-as-writer finishing that "novel."

Scenes from Gordie's memory take place in the small town named Castle Rock and the forest in its vicinity in the summer of 1959, when he "was twelve, going on thirteen" - and the other boys are of his age. The first thing that attracts our attention is the tree house where the four boys gather together. This tree house seems to be the microcosm of the idyllic life of children and the last refuge for the innocence of childhood. Its position above

the ground suggests immunity from the burden of reality and experience.

With the exception of Vern, however, the boys find themselves on bad terms with their families and the community. Gordie has felt alienated from his parents since the death of his brother Denny. Denny was a high school hero - a star in football - and was the only member of the family who understood Gordie. Gordie feels as if "that summer, at home, I had become an invisible boy" because his parents "still hadn't been able to put the pieces together again" since the sudden death of their favorite son and pay slight attention to him. Chris feels estranged from the community because "he came from a bad family and everyone just knew he'd turn out bad." In fact, he tells Gordie, "I just wish that I could go someplace where nobody knows me." For Teddy, the source of trouble is his father, who, according to Gordie-as-narrator, "was given to fits of rage" and one time, "held Teddy's ear to a stove and almost burnt it off." While, despite such a tyranny, Teddy admires him as a war hero who "stormed the beach at Normandy," the townspeople scorn him as a "loony."

In this way, the boys are situated awkwardly and uncomfortably in their families and the town where they grow up. This can be understood as a sign of their coming break from home and parental influence. In other words, the end of their childhood is at hand. The boys face the imminent disintegration of their childhood existence. In view of this, it is interesting that Gordie is invested with the image of invisibility. This image suggests that he is in a state of metaphoric dissolution or death (Vries 270). Similarly, Chris and Teddy, who are stigmatized as "strangers" positioned outside the community because of their family backgrounds, may also be said to be "invisible" beings. The boys are on the threshold of a new stage in life. When Vern brings the news about a missing boy who has gone into the forest to pick blueberries, they agree to set out looking for the corpse of the boy without hesitation - as if they were aware that it requires a journey of such an extraordinary nature to pass from one state of being to another. This news signifies the call to the passing of a threshold.

III

Although Castle Rock is just a small town, it represents for the boys "the whole world." This suggests that for them, the town denotes the familiar life horizon; it also suggests their childish perception of their hometown. Thus, their departure from the

town signifies their removal not only from the usual environment but from the childhood mode of existence. Accompanying this removal is the stripping off of the elements that provide the foundation for the previous state. We can find a striking illustration of this in Gordie's having his cap taken by Ace, the leader of a teenage gang. This cap, a memento of his brother Denny, is, for Gordie, a "lucky cap" that functions as an amulet, one that protects him with the memories of his happy childhood with the affectionate brother. In losing the cap, he is thrown into a state of insecurity and vulnerability. Similarly, Teddy's having the object of his childish idolatry - his father - mercilessly taunted can be understood as another illustration of this stripping off. Teddy is thrown into a frenzy of grief and despair when the old junkman Milo calls his father a "loony." He is divested of the role model which forms the essence of his childhood identity. In this way, the boys are stripped of important components of their childhood selves: they are stripped spiritually, if not physically, naked. This state takes on the quality of symbolic death - the death of the boys' childhood existence. In initiation rites, the separation of the initiate from his previous environment represents his ritual death (Gennep 81). The boys' entrance into the forest, then, evokes the image of the descent into the underworld. In cultural terms, the forest is regarded as an alien territory, the land of death to the secular condition. Accordingly, it is often placed as the site of initiation rites (Eliade 36).

In connection with the phase of separation, it is interesting to note that the world of *Stand by Me* is one from which women are almost totally absent. The only female character who appears in the film - except in crowd scenes - is Gordie's mother, who is just a minor character. It seems that for the boys, the mother is, unlike the father, an insignificant figure, an object of renunciation. As Gordie narrates, "finding new and preferably disgusting ways to degrade a friend's mother was always held in high regard" among the boys. The absence of women can be understood as marking the phase of separation. Gennep states that this first phase of initiation represents a separation from "the world of women and children" (74). The initiate is cut away from his mother and her influence. This accounts for the absence of women in *Stand by Me*. The break from the female and maternal world represents that from the world of childhood.

IV

The first ordeal takes place in Milo's junkyard, located at the entrance of the forest. Junkyards often evoke the image of the graveyard of civilization. Moreover, the location

of the junkyard in question suggests that it is the gateway to the land of death. There, the boys have an encounter with the legendary watchdog "Chopper," which is "the most feared and least seen dog in Castle Rock." In view of the symbolic meaning of the junkyard, this dog, kept to guard the place, is reminiscent of Cerberus, the mythical watchdog chained up in front of the gate of the underworld. We may say that the sordid old man Milo is also invested with mythic dimensions: he is reminiscent of Charon, the ferryman who carries the souls of the dead to the underworld.

The reason why Chopper is the most feared dog is that "legend had it that Milo had trained Chopper not just to sic but sic specific part of human anatomy" - that is, to "sic balls." Thus, when Milo sets the dog on the boys, they undergo ritual castration. In view of the attributes of the initiate at the second stage of initiation, this image of demasculinization is interesting. The anthropologist Victor Turner focuses on the second phase of the initiation rite and emphasizes the importance of this "liminal phase" as one of ambiguity in which initiates "elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space" (95). Turner goes on to write: "Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (95). Bisexuality or sexlessness is among their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes (Turner 102). During the liminal period, the initiate eludes the category of gender. Likewise, the boys is thrown into an ambiguous state in terms of gender.

The boys are faced with diverse ordeals in the forest. They are nearly knocked down by a train - that is prefigured in Teddy's "train dodge" earlier in the film - on the railway bridge. This train, which emerges unexpectedly and chases after them, suggests the image of an ogre or monster which inhabits the region of ordeals in myths and folktales of initiatory origin. During the night, they are horrified by howls of coyotes - the American counterpart of the wolf, which symbolizes untamed nature (Vries 505). This suggests that they have wandered into the depths of a realm a long way from a rational and civilized world. In addition, it is interesting that Gordie describes the howls, "Sounds like a woman screaming" because the wolf is often regarded as one of the transformations of the witch (Vries 505). The motif of the encounter with the witch is one of the prevalent wondertale motifs which derive from the rite of initiation (Propp 116). When the boys wade a swamp, they are beset by leeches. Gordie has a leech on his penis, which, to his horror, bleeds, and he faints. This mutilation evokes the image of circumcision - one of the prevailing

operations performed on the initiate(Eliade 4).

The ordeals the boys endure are not only of a physical character but of a psychological one. It is Gordie and Chris who are submitted to the latter. They talk to each other about “junior high” and are thereby made acutely aware that “we’ll all be split up.” Chris tells Gordie, “By next June, we’ll all be split up... It’s not gonna be like grammar school... You’ll be taking your college courses, and me, Teddy and Vern will all be in the shop courses.” That is, they become painfully aware that they are on the threshold of transformation that demands a break with the world of childhood. Gordie is shocked at Chris’s remark and says that he is not going into the college courses because he wants to be with Chris and the other boys. But Chris admonishes him not to have such a silly notion, for he believes that Gordie “could be a real writer.” Gordie retorts that writing is a “stupid waste of time,” although, according to Chris, this remark is “your dad talking.” Gordie feels very discouraged since his father “doesn’t give a shit” about him. His feelings of alienation and isolation grow to such a degree that during the night, he has a nightmare in which at Denny’s funeral, his father tells him, “It should have been you.” When the boys find the corpse, Gordie thinks of Denny’s death and is struck by that nightmare, thereby starting to weep. In thinking about “junior high,” Chris is also thrown into depressive gloom. Gordie tells him, “You could go into the college courses with me... You are smart enough.” But Chris replies, “They won’t let me. It’s the way the people think of my family in this town.” And he tells Gordie about his traumatic experience: that his teacher put on him her guilt of appropriating the milk money for the class because she thought everybody would suspect him - “one of the low-life Chambers kids” - of the theft. Like Gordie, he weeps as he talks about this.

In this way, they begin to concern themselves about their futures seriously, and in doing so, they are forced to confront the bitter realities of their situation. This experience represents for them another painful ordeal, but it also signals their departure from the child’s state free from care and affliction. And the ordeal is a cathartic experience for Gordie and Chris. They reveal their inner plights to each other, and through weeping, they release their pent-up emotions of sorrow and worry. And this makes their ties of friendship closer. Chris takes up the role of a protective figure for Gordie. He appreciates Gordie’s talent for writing and encourages him to become a writer, thereby protecting him from giving in to desperation.

While sitting around the campfire during the night, Gordie tells the other boys a story

of his invention. Interestingly, they wildly applaud this story, which concerns a boy of their age. The boy is derisively called "Lard-ass Hogan" because "he is real fat." He is the target of all manner of abuse and bullying, but "one day he got an idea, the greatest revenge idea a kid ever had." This prologue is followed by a pie-eating contest scene. When Hogan is introduced, he is jeered by the audience. The audience may be said to epitomize the society which treats him coldly. He carries out his revenge amid the contest - that is, while all the contestants including him devour pies. He vomits up his pies - he took castor oil and a raw egg shortly before he was introduced - and throws the audience into total confusion. This act has a contagious effect on the other contestants and the audience. They also become sick and begin to vomit one after another. And Hogan "enjoyed what he created - a complete and total barfarama." In this way, this story recalls a folktale with the victory of the weak over the strong as its subject. Lard-ass Hogan is invested with the image of a trickster who introduces chaos into the world by his trick. The boys greet the story with great enthusiasm because they identify with the protagonist who is the same age and is confronted with the same situation - that is, the state of alienation and isolation. And they get a vicarious thrill of pleasure out of his revenge.

V

The boys finally find the corpse of the missing boy Ray Brower, and for Gordie, this is "the first time I saw a dead human being." Probably the same is true of the other boys. They gaze awestruck at the naked fact of death: "The kid wasn't sick. The kid wasn't sleeping. The kid was dead." It is significant that Ray Brower is, like Lard-ass Hogan, "a kid our age." The boys see the death as a grim fact that can befall them. This existentialist recognition represents the transition to a mature state of confronting the harsh realities of life. Moreover, the boys may be said to see also the death of their own childhood in the death of Ray Brower. For them, the corpse represents something that they shed, as a snake its slough.

The boys are about to carry the corpse when the Ace gang appear and insist that they take the body. When Ace attacks Chris with a knife - a foreshadowing of Chris's final fate - Gordie fires a gun and makes Ace leave. For the boys, this episode represents the last ordeal, and the gun, which Chris has taken out from his house, evokes the image of the amulet the hero of an initiatory story carries as his supernatural protector (Campbell 97).

After surviving the last ordeal, the boys “decided that an anonymous phone call was the best thing to do.” Their enthusiasm for being heroes has cooled down. Consequently, “neither our gang nor their gang got the credit.” The boys become dimly aware that what is significant about their journey is not the finding of the corpse but their experience of the journey itself.

VI

When the boys return to the town, they have a strange feeling: “We’d only been gone two days, but somehow the town seemed different - smaller.” The town, of course, has not changed; it is the boys themselves who have changed. Their return represents the final phase of initiation - that of incorporation. They return to the previous environment as different beings; as those reborn to a new status. Gordie and Chris go to the place where their tree house is situated. They stand near the tree house and look down on the town, as if they took a last look at once a protective but now oppressive fold before leaving it. When Chris says, “I’m never gonna get out of this town, am I?” Gordie replies, “You can do anything you want.” After giving “some skin,” they say goodbye. The tree house also seems to be something that they shed.

And Gordie narrates: “Chris did get out. He enrolled in the college courses with me ... He went on to college, and eventually became a lawyer.” We are then told about Chris’s unexpected and tragic death, caused by his attempt to break up a fight between two men in a fast-food restaurant. After the narration, we see Gordie finish his “novel.” The novel concludes like this: “I never had any friends later on like the ones I had when I was twelve. Jesus, does anyone?”

Filmography

Stand by Me. Dir. Rob Reiner. With Wil Wheaton and River Phoenix. Columbia Pictures, 1986.

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