

THE MYTHIC HERO AT THE WHEEL: THE NARRATIVE PATTERN OF THE QUEST MOTIF IN SAM MENDES'S *ROAD TO PERDITION*

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ABSTRACT

It is the main purpose of this paper to explore the narrative pattern of the quest motif in Sam Mendes's *Road to Perdition* (2002). The study of the narrative structure in Sam Mendes's movie will illustrate that the quest constituent in the road movie genre sometimes acquires the form of a contemporary 'mechanized' version of the archetypal hero-adventure as it was described by Campbell in *A Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). The movie is based on a graphic novel by Max Allan Collins and Richard Piers Rayner, though Mendes significantly departs from it to provide the story with a mythic weight that was not present in Collins's work.

KEYWORDS

Quest motif, road movie, film adaptation, Sam Mendes, *Road to Perdition*.

EL HÉROE MÍTICO AL VOLANTE: EL PATRÓN NARRATIVO DE LA BÚSQUEDA EN *CAMINO A LA PERDICIÓN*, DE SAM MENDES

RESUMEN

El principal objetivo de este artículo es explorar el patrón narrativo del motivo de la búsqueda en *Camino a la perdición* (2002), de Sam Mendes. El estudio de la estructura narrativa en la película de Sam Mendes ilustra que el componente de búsqueda en el género de la *road movie* se manifiesta como una versión contemporánea y "mecanizada" del héroe arquetípico de aventuras descrito por Campbell en *El héroe de las mil caras* (1949). La película está basada en una novela gráfica de Max Allan Collins y Richard Piers Rayner, aunque Mendes se aleja significativamente de ella para dotar al relato de un peso mítico que no estaba presente en la obra de Collins.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Motivo de la búsqueda, *road movie*, adaptación cinematográfica, Sam Mendes, *Camino a la perdición*.

1. THE MYTHIC HERO AT THE WHEEL

The road movie, which took off as a distinct genre in the late 1960s, appeared some decades earlier as a manifestation of the American wide cultural landscape, especially as a

depiction of the American myth of mobility and opportunity.¹ Boundaries, geographical, cultural and moral, are invariably crossed by drivers in road movies as “a reflection of the wider cultural context in which the movie or text is placed” (Ireland 2003: 478). But culture is not free from criticism in road movies: “the driving force propelling most road movies (...) is an embrace of the journey as a means of cultural critique” (Laderman 2002:1). Nevertheless, beyond the manifestation and / or criticism of American culture and myths, the road movie also discloses deep universal human conflicts that may be, or not, solved on the way. Laderman considers the road as: “an essential element of American society and history, but also a universal symbol of the course of life, the movement of desire, and the lure of both freedom and destiny” (2002: 2). In short, the journey in the road movie becomes a metaphor for life, and the physical drive along the highway stands in for the inner psychological development of the travellers. Hence, one of the central conventions of the road genre is the theme of transformation of identity or rebirth that often involves the quest for self-discovery:

The road movie builds on both a physical and a mental landscape. (...) The road and its destinations are essentially a metaphor for life itself: part of a process of social learning. On the road anything can happen, one is vulnerable but also open and, at journey's end, a new person has been manifested. (Eyerman and Löfgren 1995: 67)

Their search for the self or for a new reality takes very often in the road movie the form of a quest. In fact, the notion of quest is one of the main ingredients in the road genre, though not the only one since, as Ireland (2003: 480) writes: “while the quest theme is found a lot in the road genre, in many novels and movies in the genre, the characters also seem either to be escaping from something or someone, or their journeys are entirely aimless.” Besides, as Atkinson (1994: 14) notes, if in the road movie we have an ideogram of human desire and the last-ditch search for the self, it is going to be crowded by the socially disenfranchised. Thus, the criminal and the road converge. The outlaw, the villain or heroes with questionable morals inhabit the road genre. The emphasis on the anti-hero “recalls the myth that it is possible to escape from the past and start again elsewhere, the roads eventually lead to freedom” (Sargeant and Watson 1999: 8). They decide to make a move and desperately flee their life in search for something new and substantially different from what they have left behind. The past remains at the departure and the future waits for them at the arrival: the escaped criminal Butch Haynes in Clint Eastwood's *A Perfect World* (1993) tells the boy he has kidnapped that the car in which they are running away is a time machine west toward their future.

Nevertheless, whilst the characters at the wheel cherish a better future, the road awaits them with:

¹ David Laderman emphasises this aspect of road movies in his paper “What a Trip: The Road Film and American Culture” (1996).

lurking menace, spontaneous mayhem and dead-end fatalism, never more than few roadstops away from abject lawlessness and haphazard bloodletting ... road movies have always been songs of the doomed, warnings that once you enter the open hinterlands between cities, you are on your own. (Atkinson 1994: 16).

This is the case of the protagonist couples in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *Thelma and Louise* (1991), or the serial killer Early Grayce in *Kalifornia* (1993) and Michael Sullivan in *Road to Perdition* (2002). All of them expect to live free but they paradoxically find eventual freedom through death. The latter, directed by Sam Mendes, pictures the journey of a gangster, Michael Sullivan, and his son to Perdition, where they expect to finally achieve peace and security. They are escaping from a mercenary whose only mission is to get rid of both of them. Nonetheless, simultaneously, Sullivan is also running away from his villainous past trying to amend his sins and obtain redemption or, at least, to protect his child from following his criminal footsteps. Therefore, their journey is a quest towards a better future, which reminds us of the mythic heroes' adventures.

It has already been noted that the quest theme in road movies recalls the original mythic journeys. Indeed the mythic structure is universal and ageless; it is valid for stories that took place a thousand years ago as well as for nowadays adventures. It can be interpreted once and again in a new light in accordance to the times and be adapted to best fit the contemporary world. GERAL PEARY notes this and starts his article "On the Road" with the following assertion:

As he tells you in the first paragraph of *Moby Dick*, whenever Ishmael got melancholy, antsy, or pent-up with aggression, he shipped out to sea. That was then, this is now. In the twentieth century, Ishmael would probably get in his car and drive. (1987: 65)

The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero was first and best described by Joseph Campbell in his seminal work *A Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). According to him, the pattern of the monomyth of the hero-journey is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation, initiation and return. As described by Campbell, the mythological hero ventures forth from the world of common day, sometimes encouraged by the herald figure, to the threshold of adventure. There he encounters a presence, which guards the passage that must be defeated by the hero before definitely abandoning his common world. Beyond the threshold, the road of trials awaits the hero. There he will find forces that threaten him, the tests, and some others that help him, the helpers. When the hero arrives at the middle of the mythological journey he undergoes the supreme ordeal and gains his reward. The reward may be represented as a sacred marriage, his recognition by the father-creator (father atonement) or his own divinization (apotheosis). The final stage is the return. At the return threshold the hero re-emerges from death. The boon that he had managed restores the initial world and the cycle ends. This is the basic structure described by Campbell though it is common to find variations; some narrations isolate and enlarge upon one or two elements of the full cycle,

some others fuse different characters or episodes. Beyond these physical adventures described, there is always a spiritual deed, because the journey undertaken by the hero is a simple human quest, a standard pattern of human aspiration. And this is something that we humans have in common at all times.

The archetypal adventure of the hero has been mechanized in twentieth century cinema. George Lucas's *Star Wars* illustrates this point. This movie director has openly acknowledged the great influence of Joseph Campbell's *A Hero with a Thousand Faces* in the creation of the *Star Wars* saga, and, consequently, the different stages of the journey of the hero myth, here travelling aboard a spaceship, can be easily traced in these movies. Road movies, Laderman (2002: 13) states: "rearticulate the quest motif in the increasingly mechanized framework of automobile modernity". It can be so because the patterns of archetypal adventure of the hero and of the road film genre share their main constituents. In both of them the quest is a required element, though the main focus is on the journey. Also because in both genres there is a process of development in the main character's psyche that takes place along the path/road towards the attainment of the quest.

2. THE MYTHIC WEIGHT OF ROAD TO PERDITION

When Sam Mendes undertook the project of *Road to Perdition*, he worked upon the screenplay by David Self, adapted, in turn, from Max Allan Collins's graphic novel of the same title.² This initial screenplay followed quite faithfully the story and dialogues present in Collins's work. Mendes did not fully approve this approach, since he was most attracted by the thematic complexity behind the novel's basic story and intended to make it central to his movie. Moreover, he discovered the mythic potential of the protagonists and their adventure and was determined to underline this aspect in his film production. In order to do so, he introduced numerous variations in the original story and characters, which will be analysed in the following pages. Eventually, *Road to Perdition* acquired the mythic character desired. The director emphasised this aspect of his movie in the documentary *The Making of Road to Perdition*:

You often as a filmmaker are looking for some kind of mythic story or a story that holds a mythic weight. (...) It is the story of a hit man from a small town mob, Irish mob, set in the last mythic American landscape, the 1930s³ when there was still space in which you could completely loose yourself, in the vastness of America.⁴

² After the release of Mendes's movie in 2002, Max Collins published the *Road to Perdition* Movie tie-in novel. Here I am only concerned with the original 1998 graphic novel as it was the source of inspiration for the movie, the text upon which David Self and Sam Mendes himself worked.

³ Eyerman and Löfgren (1995: 57) describe the 1930s as a historical period marked by the aftermath of the economic depression, in which the road offered a way out, the possibility of a better life.

⁴ My transcription.

The archetype of the hero-adventure and the genre of the road movie are skilfully integrated in Sam Mendes's work. I face the study of *Road to Perdition* from the point of view of the road movie genre: it is, at the same time, a quest road movie and an outlaw road movie⁵. The protagonists move *towards* something, salvation. But at the same time they run away *from* something, the mob's menace. In terms of the mythic hero adventure pattern, the hero escapes from a deficient state to look for something better towards the accomplishment of a quest. In *Road to Perdition*, father and son hit the road to Perdition, literally a small town where the boy's aunt will take him in. But *Road to Perdition* is a title with a double meaning. In literal terms, Perdition is their physical destination. But Perdition is also the stage of eternal damnation into which a sinful and unrepentant passes after death. And in that regard, Michael Sullivan's only hope is that his son will choose a different path when he grows up. Thus, physical movement parallels inner personal development.

In Sam Mendes's movie, the quest is shared: both father and son drive toward innocence and redemption. Interestingly, *Road to Perdition* features a fragmentation of identity. Michael Jr. mirrors his father's previous stage to murder; he represents the innocence his father left behind. And, Sullivan can only save himself from the certainty of damnation by securing his son's innocence. Director Sam Mendes observes in the Official Web Site of *Road to Perdition*:

Michael Sullivan considers himself to have been put on the road to hell. Now he is in a battle for the soul of his son. Can a man who has led a bad life achieve redemption through his child? That is one of the central questions asked by the movie.

Once the mythic aspect of the movie has been stated and the quest that triggers the adventure identified, the analysis of the narrative pattern according to the schema proposed by Campbell as composing the adventure of the hero myth follows. Special attention will be paid to those elements added in the adaptation of the graphic novel to the screen.

3. THE MYTHIC QUEST PATTERN IN *ROAD TO PERDITION*

3.1. Frozen Land

The first shot in *Road to Perdition* is a young boy standing by the shore of Lake Michigan, back to the camera. A voice in off, that of the oldest of Sullivan's two sons, 12-year-old Michael states the following:

⁵ As noted by Laderman (2002: 20), there are two types of road movies: the quest road movie and the outlaw road movie. While quest road movies emphasize roaming itself and a movement toward something, outlaw road movies emphasize a fugitive runaway from the scene of a crime or the pursuit of the law. However the boundary between these two genres is not clearly established since, although most road movies incline toward one of these options, some others present elements from both.

There are many stories about Michael Sullivan. Some say he was a decent man. Some say there was no good in him at all. But I once spent six weeks on the road with him in the winter of 1931. This is our story.⁶

This first image will be repeated at the end of the movie, though the speech uttered by Michael in the final scene conveys more information: the conclusions he had got to attain along the journey on the road. These two scenes, which constitute the story's framework, also represent the first noteworthy variation with respect to the graphic novel. Back to the screen, the initial words by young Sullivan disclose two significant pieces of information. First, they disclose the moral ambivalence of Michael Sullivan, whose moral stature is initially not clearly defined in his son's eyes. To reach a balance between these two opposite public points of view about his father turns to be the boy's main purpose along the story. This ambiguity is not present in the graphic novel, where Michael describes his father from the very outset as "the most honourable man I ever knew" (Collins 1998: 22). Besides, Michael's elevated opinion of his father does not falter at any moment in the novel, whatever murder or robbery Sullivan commits. In the movie, however, the building of Michael Sullivan's personality will be progressively discovered, and so in a sense built, by his son during their journey. Second, they anticipate the audience that they are going to witness the six weeks journey of this father-and-son couple. Hence, the boy appears as an essential constituent in the development of his father's character. He describes the adventure as "our story" and by doing so he also recognises the utterly important role he plays in the adventure.

The Sullivans' story begins, as told by the boy, in the frozen streets of an indeterminate town not exceedingly far from Chicago. There, the Sullivan family is committed to a presumed normality as Michael Sullivan shields his children from the true nature of his profession, mobster. He owns a big comfortable house where his wife and two sons live peacefully. This image contrasts sharply with the freezing weather outside the house. This is a story told through images rather than dialogues, and the images of water are laden with significance. As we will develop later, Mendes used water all through the film as a symbol of death. Then, in the initial stage, images of snow, representing frozen stability, turn into pouring rain once the adventure is prompted and at the end, water is set free in Lake Michigan.

According to Campbell, the mythic hero is a personage of exceptional gifts who is frequently honoured by his society. In both Collins's novel and, especially, in Mendes's movie, Mr. Sullivan is presented as someone highly respected in the community to which he belongs. The movie, however, adds some complexity to the character and the plot by picturing a very close relationship between Sullivan and Mr. Rooney, the mob boss for whom he works as his personal hit man. Here, Mr. Rooney adopts the role of surrogate father, publicly showing his preference for Sullivan over his own natural son Connor. This

⁶ The movie's script has not been published; therefore, from now on I will offer my own transcription.

intimate father-son relationship between the protagonist and Rooney, absolutely absent from the graphic novel, becomes central in Mendes's story. Mr. Rooney has provided Sullivan and his family with protection and financial security; he is the benefactor who has allowed them to live comfortably, in apparent welfare.

Nonetheless, in the hero-adventure pattern, the initial stage of welfare hides an undesirable reality, “a symbolical deficiency”, using Campbell’s terminology (1973: 37). Then, what this scholar terms “the call to adventure” takes place, that is, a blunder that reveals an unsuspected world that the individual cannot rightly understand and that opens the door to a specific destiny. The archetype figure of “the herald” produces the crises and is responsible for the “call to adventure”, marking thus what has been called “the awakening of the self” (Campbell 1973: 51). The herald appears as a guide that presents the hero with something that has remained unknown in his unconscious side and that, in a second, is brought to life. In Mendes's movie, though not in the graphic novel, the role of the herald is played by Peter, Sullivan’s youngest son.

Michael shows signs of suspicion with respect to his father’s job. In several scenes in the movie, the boy is shown looking inquisitively to his father. He has created an idealised view of him, distorting thus reality. But the repetitive enquires, which do not appear in the novel, of his younger brother definitely shatter the veil:

PETER: What is Papa’s job?

MICHAEL: He works for Mr Rooney

PETER: Why?

MICHAEL: Well, Papa didn’t have a father so Mr Rooney looked after him.

PETER: I know that, but what is his job?

MICHAEL: He goes on missions for Mr Rooney. They are very dangerous. That is why he brings his gun. Sometimes even the president sends him on missions because Papa was a war hero and all.

PETER: You are just making that up.

MICHAEL: I’m not.

Next morning, Peter, who is still wondering about his father’s job, asks again:

SULLIVAN: Peter, I can’t come to your concert tonight. I’m working.

PETER: Working at what?

MRS SULLIVAN: Putting food on your plate, young man.

The elusive answer of Mrs. Sullivan intensifies Michael’s curiosity and, resolved to discover the truth, this same night Michael hides in his father’s car and witnesses a bloodbath provoked by Connor Rooney, who is backed by Sullivan. We, the audience, see the murder in long shot, from the angle from which the hidden boy sees the murder scene. It follows a close up on Michael’s surprised eyes that allows us to enter his mind at this crucial moment of discovery, the “awakening of the self” that shakes Michael’s earlier fictional security and stability. Peter has fulfilled his role as the herald; his attitude has marked in his brother a new period, a new stage in his biography. But he has also triggered

a new situation for their father, the protective fortress Mr. Sullivan had built around his family has been knocked down, and his real identity and job discovered.

But previous to leaving, there is another stage in the adventure of the hero pattern, it is the “refusal of the adventure” and consists in the return for a while to familiar occupations. Thus, next morning both father and son resume their daily routines in an attempt to avoid reality. But in the hero-journey: “a series of signs of increasing force then will become visible until (...) the summons can no longer be denied” (Campbell 1973: 55-56). The final actions propelling the adventure are Connor Rooney’s plotting against Sullivan’s life and, definitely, his shooting Peter and Mrs Sullivan to death. Sullivan has no option and leaves their house with Michael. “This house is not our house any more. It’s just an empty building”, Sullivan says to his son, “I have to protect you now”. This father-and-son couple hits the road; the heroes are now committed to the journey. Their purpose is to reach Perdition, where they think security will be recovered but on their way Sullivan will detour for revenge. They are about to cross the first threshold.

3.2. On the Road of Trials

In road movies, where the protagonists look for a better future or escape from their past, the road represents multiple possibilities, freedom of choice, the “American dream”. Sargeant and Watson point out this aspect of the road as follows:

There are no certainties on the road, only potentialities. Whilst the journey focuses toward a final destination, detours are always possible. Other journeys never seek or reach a final destination, becoming extended wanderings with no clear teleological goal. In America’s vast landscape, with its frequent seemingly endless straight roads, it is still possible to stray from the path. (1999: 12)

But not for the outlaw on the move, they are doomed, they cannot avoid their destiny. In Sam Mendes's movie, this oppressive situation is represented in some images of the road. At this point in the story, the limiting presence of a dense forest on both sides of the road gives no way to straying out of the path. Their fate is set.

Once the threshold has been traversed, the hero must survive a succession of trials. The departure into the land of trials represents: “only the beginning of the long and perilous path of initiatory conquests and moments of illumination” (Campbell 1973: 109). These initiatory tests take place at subsequent stops along the journey. As Laderman (2002:15) notes, an important component of the journey in the road movie is that it has pits stops at motels, diners, and gas stations, often used to introduce important elements, significant narrative developments in the story. He identifies three purposes: First of all, the drivers must stop somewhere temporarily to meet various needs (rest, food, fuel ...). Second, the journey narrative can gain dramatic intrigue from unexpected plot twists resulting from such intermissions (meeting some new character, committing a crime ...). Third, they are landmarks in the development of the travellers’ relationship. Hence, these stops may coincide with the different stages in the hero mythic cycle. The end of the

journey is the culmination of the enterprise and at the same time of the characters' development and relationship; and the different stops signal relevant steps in their evolution.

The first stop in the hero's journey is made in order to look for alliances. In *Road to Perdition*, the Sullivans' first stop, after a whole night behind the wheel, is at Chicago, around 190 miles from their home. Mr. Sullivan meets there Chicago mobster Frank Nitti, who belongs to the Capone organization. Sullivan asks him for shelter but due to strategic alliances, Nitti refuses and father and son resume their journey.

The next stop on their way is at a remote diner where Sullivan meets for the first time one of his major "tests" figures. It is Maguire, an archetypal villain representative of the evil. He is a photographer who specialises in taking pictures of murder victims, who are frequently his own. He has been hired by Rooney and Nitti to murder Mr. Sullivan and will persecute the Sullivan couple up to end. The introduction of this character is a notable addition by David Self to the graphic novel. In Collins's work, the tests undergone by Sullivan are a succession of perilous encounters with a group of undefined hit men sent after them by John Rooney and various bank robberies from which he emerges successful and unscathed. In the movie, however, the villainy and active part of Connor is reinforced and the figure of Maguire is added in order to raise the difficulty of the challenge Sullivan has to face.

In this first encounter with the villain, the boy remains in the car. Sullivan has dinner alone when Maguire appears at the door, enters, and sits opposite him. After a short chilly conversation, Sullivan grows suspicious of this strange figure and leaves the diner through the back door. Up to this point in the road of trials, the role of Michael Junior has been that of a mere accompaniment for his father, who has managed to get out of Nitti's office and out of the diner alive. Dickinson (1999: 194) notes that the road is an adult preserve and that the privilege of freedom is virtually denied to children in road movies. They are lost without adults.⁷ Nevertheless, in *Road to Perdition*, young Michael is taught to drive by his father, and in that way he acquires part of responsibility in the journey and in the solving of the tests. Father and son collaborate from then onwards and, consequently, they become an outlaw couple.

Sullivan starts a campaign of robbing banks that hold mob funds in order to pressure Capone against Connor Rooney. In these robberies the boy takes an active part as the getaway driver and, progressively, Sullivan recedes to the background to give a more participative role to his son. In fact, Michael's actions are determining for the successful outcome of the following test.

Mr. Sullivan faces a new trial in a second encounter with the unemotional Maguire in the hotel Geneva. This time, he is shot by Maguire though he manages to escape thanks to

⁷ In this paper, Dickinson deals with three road movies in which children hit the road: *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939), *Night of the Hunter* (Charles Laughton, 1955) and *Walkabout* (Nicholas Roeg, 1971). Therefore, her conclusions are referred to them, though they may be extended to a larger number of movies.

Michael, who waits in the car ready to drive away. Nevertheless, he is seriously wounded and now, young Michael takes control and stops at an isolated farmhouse, where they find shelter. The warm mature couple who owns the farm generously offers their help without asking a single question. They are what Campbell termed “helpers”, representing the benign, protecting power of destiny. They are the only goodness they will find on the road. It must be pointed out that neither their encounter with the archetypal villain nor their meeting with the “helpers” are present in the graphic novel.

The stopover in the farm marks the most significant improvement in the process of humanization of Sullivan and his personal relationship with his son. Up to that moment, they have been suffering from a severe lack of communication due, mainly, to Sullivan’s inability to express emotions and his incapacity to pull down the wall he once built to hide his real identity from Michael and Peter. Now, along their adventure behind the wheel, Michael Jr. is getting to know his father. He has taken part in his criminal activities and, consequently has entered Sullivan’s professional domain. Therefore, the protective wall is not longer necessary and must be demolished to allow Michael enter his father’s emotional domain as well. In this regard, the woman in the farm is of utmost help. She prompts Sullivan’s approach to Michel by making him realise that his son dotes very much on him. This is an example of what Campbell (1973: 109) terms “a moment of illumination”. Thus, one night, during the first intimate conversation father and son maintain in the movie, they find out how much they have in common. Sullivan admits having treated Michael in a different way than Peter because he saw in his oldest son an image of himself: “You were more like me and I didn’t want you to be”. This conversation allows them to understand each other better and, when saying good night, Michael tightly and lovingly hugs his father as a signal of forgiveness.

The most intense scenes in the movie coincide with the central stage in the monomyth: the moment of initiation. In Mendes's movie, the process begins, as described in the monomyth, in a place under the ground, the “innermost cave” in Campbell’s terms. Sullivan maintains a tense conversation with his surrogate father Mr. Rooney in the dark basement of a church. This conversation reveals Sullivan’s main concern, his quest in this journey:

MICHEL SULLIVAN: He [Connor] murdered Annie and Peter!

JOHN ROONEY: There are only murderers in this room! Michael! Open your eyes! This is the life we chose, the life we lead. And there is only one guarantee: none of us will see heaven.

MICHAEL SULLIVAN: Michael could.

JOHN ROONEY: Then do everything that you can to see that that happens.

Sullivan knows that the only way to save his child’s life is by killing Rooney. And therefore, one rainy night he approaches John Rooney and, after murdering all his bodyguards, shoots him dead. This test is central in the initiation myth, as Campbell states, it can take the form of a “sacred marriage”, “father atonement”, “apotheosis” or

“elixir theft”. In *Road to Perdition*, the nuclear scene can be best understood in terms of the “father atonement” initiation rite. In Campbell’s description of this rite, it is presented as a radical readjustment of the hero’s emotional relationship to the parental images, what he calls the “mystagogue” (father or father-substitute). The hero, Campbell describes, “beholds the face of the father, understands – and the two are atoned” (Campbell 1978:147). Meaningfully, when Sullivan approaches Rooney, the old man, realising Sullivan’s intention, turns back and looking at his surrogate son’s eyes claims: “I’m glad it’s you”. This powerful scene perfectly fits the “father atonement” phase, where the hero “must have a faith that the father is merciful, and then a reliance on that mercy” (Campbell 1973: 130). He must be recognised and forgiven by the father figure, and these two things are implied in Rooney’s last words.

I find it interesting to note how much the narrative in the movie departs at this point from the graphic novel. It has already been underlined that one of Mendes's additions to Collins’s work is the complex relationship father-son established between Sullivan and Rooney. In the graphic novel, Rooney is just the gang boss who cowardly hides from Sullivan and is finally arrested by Eliot Ness. There, John Rooney is, unlike in the movie, a gangster without scruples and dignity who, in the end, collapses when he wrongly thinks that Sullivan is approaching to put an end to his life. Mendes, therefore, modifies Rooney’s character and the events related to him so as to best fit the mythic “father atonement” phase.

Campbell (1973:137) states that once the hero is separated from the father-like figure, he has become himself the father. And then he is competent, consequently, to enact himself the role of the initiator, the guide. This is the part Sullivan will play in the last scenes of the movie.

3.3. Perdition

Michael Sullivan and his son arrive at a house on the beach. In the graphic novel, the house is a farm in the countryside, but Mendes locates *Perdition* on the shore of Lake Michigan with a clear symbolic intention. There, running on the off-white sand, both father and son feel happy, free and safe at last. The symbolic heavy rain that has persisted along their journey has disappeared and now the sun shines and reflects its bright rays on the vast layer of water in front of them. Water has a twofold meaning here, it represents liberty but also death. Laderman (1996:45) notes that the outlaw road couple seems doomed to death. The theme of implacable fatal destiny eventually overtakes road movie protagonists. They rarely go back; there is not positive return for most outlaw characters behind the wheel. Mendes conveys this sense of fate by means of the water motif. In an interview, when asked about the meaning of water in his movie, the director observed:

The water motif in this film came from a piece of research about wakes in the 30s Irish wakes. And I read that they used to keep the dead bodies on ice. And the ice used to melt and drip into buckets. The buckets used to catch the water. And I just thought, what a

great image for decomposition and for the sense of fate that I wanted to hang over the film- that eventually the dam will burst, that life ... you know, once you've set one domino in motion, all of them will have to fall. And you can't control it. And to me, water is uncontrollable; it slips through your fingers. So it's in every scene. I found its way into every scene in which there was death. (Mendes 2002c: 4-5)

Therefore, water preludes the inevitable outcome. The final test awaits the heroes in *Perdition*. Maguire, the archetypal villain, is hidden in the house waiting for the couple to appear. Sullivan enters the house and, without realising Maguire's presence at his back, observes through the window at his child who, still on the beach, plays cheerfully for the first time in six weeks. At this very moment Maguire shoots at Sullivan who, as a result, is deadly injured and falls to the ground. The villain proceeds to take him a photograph at the moment of death but is interrupted by Michael Jr., who is tightly holding a gun. The boy hesitates and is not able to shoot the gun; however his father is, and with his gun injures Maguire fatally. Sullivan has defeated the villain but yet he is doomed. Nevertheless, before dying, father and son can exchange some words:

MICHAEL: I couldn't do it.

Mr. SULLIVAN: (with a smile) I know.

MICHAEL: Pa...

Mr. SULLIVAN: I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry...

The journey acquires in this scene whole significance. Sullivan is glad he has saved both Michael's physical and spiritual life. He has, in terms of the hero myth, initiated his child into innocence or, better, he has not initiated his child into murder. Young Michael, by being unable to use the gun, has remained out of his father's path to perdition. Michael Sullivan has been successful as a mythic guide and initiator. And, moreover, at the end of his trip to *Perdition* he paradoxically obtains redemption. He is sincerely repentant, and perdition is the place for the unrepentant in Christian faith, Sullivan's faith.

Again, the differences with the graphic novel are remarkable. On the one hand, while in the movie Michael Jr. does never lose his innocence, in the graphic novel he twice uses the gun to kill (Collins 1998: 185-6; 298). And, moreover, he shows cold revengeful feelings:

SULLIVAN: The man who killed your mother and your brother is dead

MICHAEL: Good. Did he suffer?

SULLIVAN: Not enough... but the world is rid of him. And we can finally go on with our lives. (Collins 1998: 292)

On the other hand, this semantically weighty scene in the movie departs to a great extent from the events pictured in the final pages of the graphic novel. There, Sullivan enters alone the farm outside *Perdition* and, once inside, is shot down by a gunman. Michael, who waits in the car, listens to the shots, runs inside armed with a gun and

unhesitatingly shoots to death his father's murderer. Afterwards, asked by his fatally injured father, the boy takes him to a Church, where he is given the last rites and is therefore absolved of all his sins.

3.4. Return

The hero, therefore, is the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms. (...) [T]he hero has died as a modern man; but as eternal man – perfected, unspecific, universal man – he has been reborn. His second solemn task and deed therefore (...) is to return then to us, transfigured, and teach the lesson he has learned of life renewed. (Campbell 1973: 19-20)

Although we are only shown [in road movies] a portion of the characters' lives, the short travelling spell shown summarizes or recalls past life and usually brings about a metamorphosis which results in a changed life pattern for the remaining future. (Indurain Eraso 2006: 40-1)

The final stage in the myth-adventure as is the hero's return to the ordinary world he left behind the threshold of the adventure. But he does not return empty handed, on the contrary, he has learnt a lesson along the journey that will cure the initial faulty world. Sullivan is dead so he cannot continue the adventure but Michael Jr. can. The young Sullivan is now in charge of transforming his existence with the help of the lesson learnt on the road. Michael cannot go back home because nobody is waiting for him there so he returns to the farm where he and his father were sheltered on their journey to Perdition. There, he recovers the parental figures and eventually attains a peaceful living in the farm. Sullivan has fulfilled his quest; his son is out of the road to perdition and by managing so he may have also achieved redemption. Michael's concluding monologue discloses the lesson learnt by the young boy along the six-week journey and shows how emotionally close he became to his father. This is the sure proof of Michael Sullivan's triumph in his heroic quest.

I saw then that my father's only fear was that his son would follow the same road. And that was the last time I ever held a gun. People always thought I grew up on a farm. And I guess, in a way, I did. But I lived a lifetime before that, in those 6 weeks on the road in the winter of 1931. When people ask me if Michael Sullivan was a good man, or if there was just no good in him at all, I always give the same answer. I just tell them... he was my father.

4. CONCLUSION

The graphic novel lacks the thematic and symbolic complexity of Mendes's work. In adapting the graphic novel to the screen, Mendes introduced in the story significant variations leading to the construction of a well designed narrative following the pattern of

the hero monomyth. In doing so, the director also adds predictability to the end, what has been the object of most of the not many negative reviews received by the movie. However, by adding key elements in the hero-journey, such as the herald, the archetypal villain, the helpers and the central scene of father atonement, Mendes achieves to provide this period gangster film with the mythic tone he desired. He transforms Collins's tale of revenge into a mythic quest. The original cold-blooded Michael Sullivan, whose nickname in the graphic novel is "archangel of death", becomes in the movie a heroic good-hearted father who is not only running away from the menace that threatens his son's life but also driving towards the attainment of a universal timeless human quest: redemption.

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