

AN ANALYSIS OF FLASHBACK PLOT IN THE INCEPTION MOVIE

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Abstract— This study is entitled “Analysis of flashback plot in the Inception Movie.” Movie Inception by Christopher Nolan as the objects of the research. The aims of this study were (1) to describe the plot arrangement of the Inception movie and (2) to describe the type of the plot in the Inception movie. This study used the theory proposed by Holman (1980) to conduct this study. Descriptive and qualitative method were used in this study, in order to collect the data. Such as downloading the movie from the internet, watching and listening to the movie throughly, classifying various fragments of sentences, dialogues, and scenes. Then, examine, analyze, and interpret these fragments in order to understand the plot structure according to the theory. The results reveal that the plot structure of "Inception" includes three main parts: the beginning, middle, and end. The middle part stands out due to its complex problems, which make the story more engaging while still entertaining. Moreover, "Inception" is characterized as a flashback plot structure, with key elements including exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and catastrophe.

Keywords— *Flashback, Plot, Movie*

1. Introduction

Literature is a means of expressing ideas and emotions, whether through spoken or written words. Klarer (2004:1) defines literature as encompassing all forms of written expression, though not every piece of writing qualifies as literature in the strictest sense. Additionally, Klarer (1998:0) categorizes literature into three main genres: fiction, which includes novels and short stories; drama, which includes comedy and tragedy; and poetry, which encompasses narrative and lyric poetry. Films are often classified under the drama category. Ramrao (2016:150) highlights that film and literature share common elements, particularly in their intrinsic and extrinsic components. Both serve as artistic expressions of the human mind. Literature typically communicates through poetic, dramatic, or fictional forms, using narrative techniques to convey human experiences. In contrast, film focuses on spoken communication, especially through sound. Despite their differences, both film and literature aim to spark the imagination and deepen human understanding.

Literary works have two types of elements, Intrinsic Elements and Extrinsic Elements. Stanton (1966:12) classifies intrinsic elements into categories such as plot, character, characterization, point of view, setting, conflict, and theme. This research thesis will specifically focus on character, characterization, and conflict within the context of the movie. PLOT: refers to the sequence of events that reveal how characters act and the choices they make. A plot is a collection of multi events that happen to form the foundation of the story. In a classic short story, the plot is often structured into five distinct parts: exposition, rising action, conflict, climax, and resolution. Characters are integral to the plot, as the actions and decisions within the narrative are shaped by them. Without characters, the plot would lack direction and coherence. The progression of the story relies on the role of characters, with minor ones contributing depth and supporting the development of the protagonist. Analyzing the interaction between characters and the plot is crucial for understanding the overall narrative, providing deeper insights and a more comprehensive grasp of the story.

This study explores a key element in movies: the plot. The plot in literary works is very important because it can affect the way the story is told even if indirectly. Analyzing the plot reveals issues that influence the narrative. The writer emphasizes the flashback plot due to its impact on overall story development. An intriguing flashback in the narrative contributes to changes in both the storyline and characters. This plot element can affect other aspects in a movie, such as setting, theme and character

development. Connecting this crucial element will engage readers and provide a fresh experience, as it relates to the story's structure.

In story writing, characters and settings are built upon the plot. It must be used to logically arrange events and information. The plot cannot overshadow other aspects of a story because writers have to be careful about it. There are two types of main plot structure that is chronological order and flashback. Chronological order. According to Holman (1980:116) chronological order involves arranging events in the sequence in which they actually occurred, creating a linear progression from past to future. While events may reference different times, they are presented in a sequential manner. In contrast, a flashback, as explained by Holman (1980:413), is an inserted scene that shifts the narrative back to an earlier point in time from the current moment. This technique is used by writers in fiction, drama, or film to reveal scenes or incidents that happened before the present moment in the story.

According to Abrams (1979:8-26), in literary work there are four critical theories that can be used to identifying, analyzing, evaluating, and writing literature. Those theories are, Objective, Mimetic, Pragmatic, Expressive Theory. Objective Approach, the objective approach fundamentally depends involves examining works of art independently of external factors. It considers art as a self-contained entity, separate from outside influences. Analysis is based solely on the elements within the work itself. As stated, "The objective orientation, which views the work of art in isolation from all external references, analyzes it as a self-sufficient entity defined by its internal components and relations, and evaluates it solely by criteria intrinsic to its own nature." Based on these approaches, the writer applies the Objective Theory to analyze the literary work. This approach is used to understand the literary elements such as theme, plot, setting, character, and language style. In this study, the researcher will be focusing on analyzing the impact plot of the story.

2. Literature Review

There are three closely related articles that explore the concept of plot and consider similar issues. The first article is by Anggriani, et al (2022) under the title "Plot Analysis in *The Giver* by Lois Lowry." This study has taken a look at the plot elements in *The Giver* book. This study employed an observational approach to collect data which included identifying key words associated with each element of the plot reading through text many times while taking notes as they perceived the narrative. Data were analyzed descriptively and qualitatively using Macewan's reference to Freytag's theory (1900). The results unveil that this novel adopted dramatic plot structure featuring rising action, climax, falling action, resolution and catastrophe. Anggriani's study and the present research share a common focus on plot analysis, establishing a clear similarity in their research topics. However, there is diverge in the theoretical view, Anggriani's study employs Freytag's theory (1900), while the current research is based on Holman's theory (1980). This contrast in theoretical perspective highlights different approaches to analyzing plot structures

The Second article by Wiwobo, Lestari (2019) under the title "An Analysis of Plots in James W. Ellison's *Akeelah and The Bee*". The research concerns itself with the plot of *Akeelah and the Bee*, treating it as data, which are classified by their plots' types and analyzed in terms of descriptive analysis. This study aims at understanding what type of plot is found in the novel *Akeelah and the Bee*. Research findings indicate that; (Flashback Plot because containing elements are Conflict, Exposition I, Exposition II, Exposition III, Exposition IV, Climax I, Climax II and End). There are both similarities and differences between Wibowo's study and this study. The similarity lies in the topic, as both studies focus on plot analysis. However, the differences are notable in the data sources and theoretical frameworks used. This study analyzed the movie *Inception* by Christopher Nolan, while Wibowo's study examined the novel *Akeelah and the Bee* by James W. Ellison. Additionally, Wibowo's study employed Freytag's theory for plot analysis, while this study employed Holman's theory.

The third article is written by Aristo (2018) entitled the Influences of Flashback to the Plot "The Iron Lady" Movie. The study has two objectives: to describe the plot arrangement of *The Iron Lady* and to identify the type of plot used in the film. Descriptive and qualitative techniques were employed, as the analysis was based on the movie data. The researcher collected data by watching the film, using this approach to understand the intrinsic elements, particularly the plot arrangement and type of plot in *The Iron Lady*. The qualitative analysis, which is part of primary research, reveals that the plot arrangement consists of three parts: the beginning, the middle, and the end. The film utilizes a flashback plot type, with elements including exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and catastrophe. There are both similarities and differences between the previous study and this one. The similarity lies in the research topic, as both studies focus on analyzing flashback plots. However, the difference is in the data sources used. This study analyzed the movie *Inception* by Christopher Nolan, while the previous study focused on Phyllida Lloyd's movie.

3. Research Method

The main data used for this study was the movie "Inception," directed by Christopher Nolan. It was released in 2010 in the United States and lasts for 148 minutes. The focus of this research was on the detailed story of the film, which explores how dreams and the subconscious mind can be manipulated. While acknowledging the film's complex storytelling, this study specifically looked at analyzing the plot itself, rather than how the story is told. To better understand "Inception," various sources such as reviews, academic articles, and online resources were consulted. The main goal of this study is to provide a thorough examination of the plot and the important themes found throughout the movie.

In analyzing the data, this study used descriptive qualitative method. The steps of analyzing the data in this study were: 1) First downloading the movie from the internet, thoroughly watching and listening the movie 2) Second, categorizing different fragments such as sentences, dialogues scenes classify based on theory. 3) Third, the data are examined, analyzed, and interpreted into a paragraph in order to understand the plot structure according to the theory. First step was identified the collected data and classified in accordance with the plot type that categorized the qualitative data based on the theory proposed by Abrams (1979). The second and third step was identify the plot elements that applied in the movie by theory proposed by Holman (1980).

4. Results and discussion

A. The Plot arrangement of The Inception Movie

The Inception movie follows Dom Cobb, skilled dream thief who specialized in stealing information from important people subconscious during their dreams. The film begins when Saito a wealthy businessman offered Cobb a risky mission, the mission is to perform an Inception on Robert Fisher, an heir to a world-class energy businessman. Saito plans to enter Fisher's dream to weaken Fisher's company in order to benefit Saito's company. Saito offered Cobb a chance to erase Cobb's criminal record so that he can return home to his children. To accomplish his mission, Cobb assembles a team including Arthur, Saito, Yusuf, Eames and a dream architect named Ariadne. However, the toughest obstacle Cobb experiences in this mission is not his enemy, but the shadow of Cobb's guilt towards his wife. Mal, continues to enter Cobb's dream because his guilt towards Mal affects his subconscious, Her presence haunts his dreams, threatening the success of the mission by manipulating Cobb's subconscious with memories of their past together. Despite the challenges, with Mal's help Cobb can release the shadow of his guilt towards Mal and is able to complete their dream theft mission. At the end of the film, Cobb is finally able to return home to meet his children. However, this scene is ambiguous because Cobb's totem or dream detector rotates as he hugs his children, which may indicate that he is still in the dream world.

B. The Type of Plot of The Inception Movie

There are two types of plots: chronological order and flashback. In this research, it is concluded that the plot of the film Inception employs a flashback structure, as the narrative frequently returns to earlier points in time. The sequence of events in a flashback plot is organized into exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and catastrophe.

1. Exposition

According to Holman (1980:236) Exposition provides essential background information about the story, including characters, setting, and initial conflicts. A flashback, integrated into the exposition, reveals events that occurred before the current timeline, offering additional context and depth to the narrative. The exposition of the movie Inception sets up the story by introducing the world, characters, and central conflict. In the opening scenes, we meet the protagonist, Dom Cobb, who has the unique ability to enter dreams and extract secrets. When looking at the context of the film Inception, through the visuals of the flashback scene, the audience is invited to take the narrative into the past to see Cobb's background and the influence of the past that is attached to Cobb's fear. The film begins with Cobb waking up on a beach, awakened by the echoing voices of two kids playing in the sand. The scene then shifts to Cobb being escorted to a dining table, where an elderly Japanese man entertains him. The man, spinning Cobb's metal gyro totem, questions whether Cobb has come to kill him.

"I've seen this before, I've seen this many, many years ago." (02:25) Excerpt of Exposition dialogue 1

The line above indicates a shift in time. It suggests that Saito is recalling a past event, linking the present moment to a memory from years ago. In Inception, where time can be experienced differently within dreams, this kind of temporal shift often signals a flashback. After the totem spins, the scene shifts to 50 years ago in

the same place. The old man is Saito, Cobb's rival 50 years ago. They appear to be fighting, fighting over a piece of paper. A woman appears and points a gun at Cobb, the woman is Cobb's wife. When Cobb looks at his watch, it freezes and he wakes up from his dream.

2. Rising Action

According to Holman (1980:186), the rising action that establishes the story's initial situation continues to unfold and is revealed to the audience through hints and flashbacks. This core dramatic structure feels timeless and unchanging. See also tragedy, conflict, act, catastrophe, climax, crisis, plot. The rising action covers Cobb's acceptance of the inception mission and the assembly of his team. He meets a young architect, Ariadne and invites her to help the team with him. In the team there are Arthur, Eames, Ariadne, Yusuf and in this timeline finally Cobb and Saito decide to work together on a mission to plant the dream mind of Fischer, the heir to a world-scale energy company. In the rising action there are many flashbacks between Cobb and his deceased wife.

“You know how to find me, you know what you have to do.” (54:44) Excerpt of raising action dialogue 1

The line above indicates dreams often blur the boundaries of time. This line can be seen as a connection between different time periods in Cobb's life, as dreams allow him to revisit and relive past moments with Mal. Cobb getting flashbacks about his wife again when he tried to enter a dream. Back and forth to the moment Mal almost lost her life on the train track then moved to their romantic moment at Mal's childhood home. In the next scene, Ariadne sneaks into Cobb's dream and watches how Cobb dreams about his wife. Ariadne was caught sneaking around, prompting Cobb to rush to the surface, where he briefly recalled a memory of his wife playing with their children on the beach.

“This is not a dream, this is memories! And you said never to use memories. You're trying to keep her alive, you can't let her go” (Inception 56:28) Excerpt of raising action dialogue 2

The line above spoken by Ariadne provides the audience with clarity that what Ariadne observed in Cobb's dream isn't merely a dream but a flashback of his moments with his family. It reveals that Cobb is using real memories within the dream, reflecting his unresolved emotions and past experiences with his wife and children.

“And we had a life I would do anything to get back to now. But that reality wasn't enough for me, then.” (Inception 1:15:39) Excerpt of raising action dialogue 3

The phrase spoken by Cobb is a flashback, it reflects on past experiences and emotions, revealing the speaker's regret about past decisions and longing for a life they once had. The scene begins with a flashback of Mal and Cobb arguing in their home in front of their child. The scene then shifts to a messy hotel room, where Cobb stands with a flower in his hand. He looks out the window to see Mal sitting on the ledge of the opposite window, her hair blowing and feet dangling over the dizzyingly high atrium. Suddenly, Mal slips forward into space, and Cobb screams after her.

3. Climax

According to Holman (1980:113), in literary work such as essays, short stories, dramas, or novels, the climax is the point of highest interest, where the audience experiences the greatest emotional response. This term serves as a measure of the emotional impact on the audience or spectator. In Inception, the climax occurs in the deepest dream level, Limbo, where Cobb confronts Mal and must resolve his guilt over her death. This moment is critical for the success of the inception and for Cobb's emotional resolution. It's the peak of emotional and narrative tension.

“You're waiting for a train. A train that will take you far away. You know where you hope this train will take you, but you can't know for sure. Yet it doesn't matter....” “I wish you were. But I couldn't make you real. I'm not capable of imagining you in all your complexity and... perfection. As you

really were. You're the best I can do. And you're not real.” (Inception 02:08:58) Excerpt of climax action dialogue 1

The passage is a flashback because it shows Cobb reflecting on past experiences and emotions, indicating they are emotionally stuck in the past. The speaker expresses regret over their inability to fully capture or recreate someone from their memory, which highlights their lingering attachment to past relationships and experiences. This fixation on the past and the acknowledgment of unresolved feelings suggest that the speaker remains anchored in their previous experiences, unable to fully move on.

“but we had our time together. And now I have to let go...” (Inception 02:13:05) Excerpt of climax action dialogue 2

The phrase is crucial in the climax because it signifies Cobb’s emotional turning point. At this moment, Cobb reaches a pivotal realization that he must release his attachment to past memories with Mal to move forward. In this scene, Mal nods, weakly. Cobb holds Mal as her eyes close, dying and Cobb give her one last kiss on her forehead. This acceptance is essential for resolving his internal conflict and allows him to confront his guilt and grief, ultimately freeing him to return to his current life and complete his mission to find Saito who’s trapped in the Limbo.

4. Falling Action

From Holman's perspective (1980:229), the falling action is the latter part or resolution of a dramatic plot. It comes after the climax, often starting with a tragic force, and shows the declining fortunes of the hero in a tragedy while highlighting the successful actions of the opposing characters, ultimately leading to the catastrophe. See dramatic structure for more details. In Inception, the falling action involves the team’s coordinated efforts to wake up through the synchronized kicks in each dream layer. The mission was successful and everyone woke up from their dreams. However, Cobb is still in the dream. Turn out the dream Cobb had, was the flashback of the scene as in the beginning he found the old Saito and tell Saito that the world he lives in is not the reality. asked Saito to come back to the real world so he can be young again. he unknowingly entered Limbo as he (and Robert) died in the third level of the dream, and ended up accepting Limbo as his reality, thus why he aged during his time there.

“I came back for you, I came to remind you of what you once knew... That this world is not real.” (Inception 2:16:18) Excerpt of falling action dialogue 2

5. Catastrophe

Holman (1980:94) defined catastrophe as the ending of a play, especially in a tragedy, and identifies it as the last of the four sections the ancients used to divide a play. It is the final phase in the falling action, resolving the dramatic conflict and concluding the plot with actions stemming from the climax. Often associated with tragedy, it typically involves the hero's death and is sometimes extended to describe an unhappy ending or event. The catastrophe resolves Cobb’s personal journey as he returns home to his children, symbolizing his emotional release and freedom from past guilt. The final scene with the spinning top leaves the audience with an open-ended question about reality, reflecting the film's themes.

Cobb : “Hey.”

James & Philippa : “Daddy!”

Cobb : “How are you?”

James : “Look what I have been building!”

Cobb : “What are you building?” (Inception 2:20:09) Excerpt of denouement action dialogue 1

The scene flashes back to two kids playing in the garden. This time, Cobb can see their faces clearly, and it appears they have been waiting for him to return home for a long time. As James and Philippa turn and see their father, Cobb approaches the window, observing their joyful faces as they run toward him. However, the

ending remains ambiguous because Cobb's totem is still spinning, suggesting he might still be dreaming and stuck in his past memories.

5. Conclusion

Inception tells the story of a thief named Dom Cobb who steals secrets from his victim's subconscious. This is a unique feature that makes him different from other thieves. Cobb can act if his victim is already asleep and dreaming. Having a great reputation actually makes Cobb an international fugitive. He can improve his fate if he succeeds in carrying out a mission that is different from the others. This time the mission is aimed at someone named Robert Fischer. Many conflicts can be learned from this movie. When watching a movie, recognizing the plot is necessary to clearly identify and appreciate the story's content. This understanding allows the story to be followed from beginning to end more easily. It can be said that the plot provides a general description of the story. The plot of this film compels thorough viewing. A sense of drama in the film makes the story more vivid. Watching the movie can also enrich vocabulary mastery, useful for daily communication, thereby improving language skills in speaking, reading, listening, and writing. Therefore, discussing the plot of the movie Inception is interesting.

Based on the result of the study, some suggestion can be given to the English teacher, especially the teacher of literature and the future researcher and also to the reader. To the teacher of English literature, the teacher should be creative in presenting the material of the lesson, especially study literature. The teacher can use the Inception movie as the material of the lesson.

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