

Exploring the Influence of Cultural Values on Dream Pursuit in Animated Films: A Case Study of Soul

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Abstract—This study focuses on the animated film *Soul*, examining the impact of cultural values on the behavioral choices of the protagonist, Joe Gardner, with particular emphasis on the interplay of American individualism and symbolic interactionism. In the film, Joe Gardner's pursuit of his dreams and the evolution of his mindset form the narrative core. Influenced by typical American individualistic cultural values, Joe initially fixates on his musical dreams, elevating them to the highest priority. This leads to a lifestyle that neglects the ordinary aspects of life, alienates friends and family, and centers entirely around his dream of performing on stage, reflecting the all-or-nothing pursuit of personal achievement under individualism. The interaction between Joe and 22 becomes a pivotal turning point, subtly integrating the humanistic care and authenticity inherent in collectivist culture. From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, the exchanges between Joe and 22 are filled with various symbolic signs that carry new meanings, reshaping Joe's perception of life and prompting him to adjust his behavior. He gradually begins to cherish ordinary moments and actively repair interpersonal relationships. Through close textual analysis and cultural theory, this study uncovers the underlying logic of Joe's behavioral transformation amid the collision and integration of diverse cultural values, opening new avenues for exploring the deeper meanings of the film and understanding the complex relationship between culture and character development.

Keywords—*Soul*; cultural values; American individualism; symbolic interactionism.

I. INTRODUCTION

(I) Research Background

The movie *Soul* has had a far-reaching influence in the social and cultural context. It has not only become an important carrier of mainstream cultural values but has also triggered widespread resonance and stimulated the academic community's interest in exploring the deeper cultural and theoretical meanings behind it. Through its unique narrative and profound themes, *Soul* successfully disseminates mainstream cultural values. The core concept of the movie, the “Spark,” is not a traditional “life goal,” but rather a love and passion for life, aligning with society's current exploration of the individual's inner world and the meaning of life. The movie conveys the value that “the meaning of life is simply the state of being alive,” encouraging the audience to cherish the present moment, live in the now, and appreciate life's beauty. This value holds special significance in the post-pandemic era, providing people with a new attitude towards life and spiritual support.

Through the experiences of the main character, Joe Gardner, the film explores universal issues such as the conflict between dreams and reality, and the meaning of life—themes that

easily resonate with the audience. Joe Gardner, an ordinary middle school music teacher, has a modest dream and a simple life, allowing many viewers to relate. Elements like the streets of New York and the bustling crowds further enhance the audience's empathetic experience, depicting ordinary life in an ordinary world.

The film has sparked extensive discussions among audiences and has also drawn great interest from the academic community. It encompasses rich philosophical and cultural backgrounds, such as Plato's concept of “spirit and flesh in three parts,” and Jungian psychology. These deep cultural connotations provide rich material for scholars to explore the movie from various perspectives. The concept of the “spark” has led to in-depth research on the meaning of life, self-knowledge, and emotional resonance. Additionally, the film's cross-cultural communication strategy has attracted academic attention, exploring how to realize cross-cultural communication through the lens of cultural discount. *Soul* is not only an excellent animated film but also a work rich in philosophy and emotional depth. It has successfully disseminated mainstream cultural values, triggered widespread resonance, and stimulated interest in the deeper cultural and theoretical meanings behind it, offering spiritual comfort and new perspectives for academic research.

(II) Research Purpose and Significance

While the field of film and television culture research is thriving, there are still gaps in theoretical analysis. Joe Gardner exists in a typical American social and cultural context, and many of his behavioral choices are deeply influenced by American individualism. American individualism emphasizes the extreme pursuit of individual dreams, elevating self-realization to a very high status. Joe Gardner, a middle school music teacher, is obsessed with jazz, considering his daily teaching as a mere springboard to his dream stage. He frequently seeks performance opportunities, even at the expense of his own physical safety, and seizes rare opportunities, even when out of his body. This obsession stems from the value of “self-fulfillment” in individualistic culture, which drives individuals to dedicate themselves to their dreams without regard for other aspects of their lives.

In terms of social relationships, Joe initially prioritizes the individual, ignoring the feelings of his family and friends. Invitations to his friends' parties and his mother's concerns are often disregarded because of his focus on piano practice, with his personal dream overriding all social constraints—a typical behavioral tendency shaped by individualism.

Joe's psychological transformation is explored through symbolic interaction theory, which focuses on how individuals shape their self-perception based on the reactions of others. Before reaching the peak of his dream, Joe's self-identity is narrowly defined by the label of "future great jazz musician," and the feedback he receives from the world regarding his musical accomplishments is the sole measure of his self-worth. After experiencing life with 22, new interactions with those around him—such as the enjoyment of delicious street pizza, his mother's needlework, and the barbershop owner's life story—reshape his view of life. The warmth and beauty found in these daily "symbols" prompt Joe to reexamine himself, break free from his original narrow identity, and undergo a psychological transformation from a paranoid dreamer to a lover of life.

This analysis of Joe's case has dual significance. On one hand, it offers insight into the integration of American individualistic culture into literary creation, helping to understand how mainstream cultural values shape fictional characters. On the other hand, it broadens the application of symbolic interaction theory in film and television interpretation, which has traditionally focused on sociological contexts.

(III) Research Questions and Methodology

Research Question 1: What are the underlying factors and how do they interact with Joe Gardner's view of his musical dream as his life's entirety, driven by the cultural value of American individualism? What scenes in the movie accurately reflect the extent to which Joey's value orientation centered on personal achievement fits with this cultural value?

There are at least two underlying factors, besides American individualism, that shape Joe Gardner's pursuit of his musical dream. On the family side, his mother's ambivalent attitude—supporting his music studies while emphasizing stable work—leaves Joe feeling restricted by his ideals, turning his pursuit of music into an act of rebellion against his family's "constraints." This intensifies his obsession with his dream in an individualistic manner. From a social class perspective, Joe, being from an ordinary background, is impacted by examples of music transforming social class, prompting him to believe that music is the key to breaking through class barriers and winning respect. This anxiety intertwines with his individualistic desire for self-fulfillment, reinforcing his devotion to his musical dream.

In the movie, several scenes highlight Joe's value orientation towards personal achievement and the influence of American individualism. In the opening scene, when Joe learns about a performance opportunity, he ignores the greetings of friends and colleagues, consumed by thoughts of the performance and future success. This scene underscores his extreme focus on his own goals. When invited to a friend's party, Joe directly rejects the invitation, prioritizing preparation for the performance over any social interaction. This perfectly mirrors the concept of self-actualization central to individualistic culture.

Research Question 2: In the process of Joe Gardner's interaction with 22, how does G. H. Mead's theory of "role-playing" present itself, and from the perspective of the construction of social reality through symbolic interaction, which "symbols" reshape Joe Gardner's understanding of the meaning of life, and how are they intrinsically linked to each other, and how do they play an integrated role in the formation of Joey's sense of self? How are the two intrinsically linked, and how do they synthesize Joe Gardner's sense of self?

In Joe Gardner's interaction with 22, "role-playing" is characterized by a Transposition experience. Joe Gardner is forced to enter the perspective of 22, breaking through the musician's single identity, experiencing the daily life with a new identity, dismantling the solidified self-cognition, and opening the door to reflecting on the old life of pursuing dreams. From the point of view of constructing social reality through symbolic interaction, "symbols" such as pizza, falling leaves, and the songs of artists in the subway station reshape Joe Gardner's understanding of life. The pizza, which is originally ordinary, is given the meaning of enjoying small fortune because 22 is indulged in it; the falling leaves are cherished by 22, and transformed from a street scene to a symbol of the spirit of life; and the voice of the singer is touched by 22, and reveals the passion of ordinary art. The intrinsic connection lies in the fact that "role-playing" puts Joe Gardner in an open state of accepting new meanings, which makes it easier for him to accept the new meanings carried by the "symbols". The two work together to break down Joey's old narrow self-consciousness, and push him to construct a new self-consciousness which is more rich and diversified, and which treasures ordinary daily life. The two work together to break down Joey's old narrow self-consciousness, push him to build a new self-consciousness that is richer and more diversified, cherishing the ordinary and daily life, and to complete the metamorphosis of his perception of the meaning of life.

In this study, the literature research method, the film text close reading method and the case study method are comprehensively applied to analyze the hidden cultural and theoretical vein behind *Soul* in an all-round and deep level. The literature research method provides a solid theoretical foundation for the study by systematically combing G. H. Mead's symbolic interactionism and the related research results of American individualistic culture. The textual reading method analyzes Joey's lines, body movements, and environmental background frame by frame, and explores the emotions and values behind the details of his words and actions. The case study method focuses on the core case of Joey, combining Mead's theory of symbolic interaction and American individualistic culture to analyze his psychological metamorphosis process, revealing the concrete embodiment of individualistic culture in individual life and the important role of symbolic interaction in psychological change. These methods complement each other, not only helping to understand how American individualist culture permeates literary creation and influences characterization, but also

providing examples for the expansion of the application scenarios of symbolic interaction theory, and contributing new ideas for film and television criticism and cultural sociology research.

II. AN EXAMINATION OF INDIVIDUALISTIC VALUES AND MEAD'S THEORY OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTION

(I) Overview of American Individualistic Cultural Values

The formation of American individualistic culture has a deep historical lineage, and its core qualities emphasize the supremacy of individual freedom and self-realization as the ultimate pursuit. The conception of this culture can be traced back to the early pioneering spirit and the westward movement and other important historical events.

After being persecuted, the early Puritans came to the new continent of North America on the Mayflower ship and found it still barren. Far from their own countries and families, they had to rely on their own hard-working hands to struggle and fight for survival, or else they would be eliminated. This environment bred the original individualism, emphasizing independence and self-struggle. These early settlers reclaimed and built on barren lands, forming the core values of American culture that valued individual effort and self-actualization.

The westward movement was a page of American history full of pioneering, courage and adventure.¹⁸ From the 18th to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the United States engaged in massive expansion and plunder from east to west after the end of the War of Independence and before the outbreak of the Civil War. In this process, a large number of immigrants moved to the west for different reasons, which objectively eased the internal contradiction of the bourgeoisie, enlarged the domestic market, and destroyed the balance between the free states and the slaveholding states, laying the foundation for the victory of the Civil War. The westward movement not only promoted the rapid development of the American capitalist society, but also cultivated the pioneering spirit of the American people, especially the cowboy spirit and frontier spirit that defied hardship, fear of sacrifice, and the spirit of spiritedness to keep searching for new land and wealth. These spirits later became the spirit of the entire nation of Americans who were forward-looking, bold and optimistic, and courageous in pioneering and exploring.

The core qualities of American individualistic culture emphasize the supremacy of individual freedom and self-realization as the ultimate pursuit. This cultural philosophy holds that individuals are capable of independence and subjectivity as independent personalities in an equal society at the moral, political and economic levels. Individuals are free to choose who or what they associate with, and have no obligation or responsibility to accept non-committal coercion from society in the process. Individualism occupies an important place in American culture and is the constructed foundation of its political and social life. Americans believe in individualism and are happy to live according to an idealized model based on it. This cultural concept not only influences the political system and economic model of the United States, but also permeates the daily ethical and social behavior.

The formation of American individualistic culture has a

deep historical lineage, with early historical events such as the pioneer spirit and the westward movement providing fertile soil for its nurturing. These events emphasized the importance of independence and self-struggle, and formed the core values of individual freedom and self-realization in American culture. These values have not only influenced the political, economic and social structure of the United States, but have also profoundly affected the daily lives and behavior patterns of Americans.

(II) Explanation of the core ideas of G. H. Mead's symbolic interactionism

G. H. Mead's symbolic interactionism reveals to us the underlying logic of human social behavior and psychology, which implies three key dimensions. First, self-consciousness is born in social interaction. When we turn to the original G. H. Mead's theory, we can see that the shaping of the self is a journey that is closely intertwined with others. Role-playing is a key part of this journey, in which people learn to look at themselves from the standpoint of others, just as children mimic the words and actions of adults to understand their social roles, and each imitation of the harvested gestures in response is a fragment of the construction of self-cognition, and in the social environment as an "incubator", the continuous interaction constantly enriches and corrects self-consciousness. Second, symbolic interaction builds social reality. Symbols are ubiquitous in interpersonal communication, serving as carriers of meaning and building bridges for our communication. Whether they are simple words, subtle gestures, or fleeting expressions, they are all endowed with specific meanings that help people define the situation they are in and anchor the value of their actions. Between groups, relying on the exchange of these symbols, consensus gradually converges, currency symbolizes wealth, flags cohesion of national identity, people use this to shape the structure of a huge and complex social reality, but also for the interpretation of film and television in the surreal world of interaction to provide theoretical support. Finally, self-awareness guides behavioral self-regulation. In the process of socialization, individuals continuously internalize social expectations and values to form a solid self-concept. This internalized self-awareness is like a compass for action, silently calibrating daily behavior. Whenever it violates the principles of self-adherence, it drives the individual to take the initiative to adjust to the social norms in his or her mind, maintains the dynamic harmony between the individual and the society, and ensures the steady progress of the socialization process.

III. THE INFLUENCE OF INDIVIDUALISTIC CULTURAL VALUES ON JOEY'S BEHAVIORAL CHOICES

In *Soul*, Joe Gardner's behavior and value orientation deeply reflect the influence of American individualistic culture. Joe Gardner takes his music dream as the guiding principle, and his daily work and rest almost completely revolve around music, sacrificing his rest time and neglecting the interaction with his family and friends, which shows the characteristic of individualism that focuses on personal achievement without

any preoccupation. Joe Gardner's fearlessness in pursuing his dream is reflected in his aggressive and risky efforts to secure performance opportunities, despite the fact that he has to defy his superiors and run around for fundraising. Joe Gardner's perception that personal success is strongly related to social praise and his desire to perform on the top stage to reap the cheers and glory from the outside world reveals the logic of the individual's value in an individualistic culture that relies on the external world's affirmation of one's own value. The contrast between his fervent devotion to music and his indifference to family and friends highlights how individualism has tilted the scale of Joey's value heavily in favor of personal achievement. Through his interaction with 22, Joey eventually realizes that the meaning of life lies not only in realizing his dreams, but also in enjoying every ordinary moment of life. These episodes not only demonstrate the profound impact of individualistic culture on individual behavior and values, but also provoke the audience to think deeply about the meaning and value of life.

IV. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION OF JOE GARDNER IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

In *Soul*, Joe Gardner's self-consciousness begins to be reshaped by his encounter with 22, whose naivety but full of zest for life is like a mirror reflecting Joe Gardner's utilitarian and dry inner world, and stimulating his dormant self-reflection. Joe Gardner and 22 are forced to experience life in a different place, and from initial resistance to gradual integration, Joe Gardner's old self-cognition begins to loosen under the new mode of interaction, and a new sense of consciousness breaks through the ground. The reconstruction of the meaning of life is reflected in their symbolic interaction. Mundane things in the film, such as pizza and fallen leaves, are transformed from everyday objects into symbols that carry the philosophy of life through Joe Gardner's interaction with 22, opening up a new perception of the richness of life for Joe Gardner. Through the perspective of 22, Joe Gardner integrates different values to examine life, breaks through the limitation of a single perspective of personal achievement, and reshapes the ordering of life values.

The adaptation of behavioral patterns marked Joe Gardner's journey toward a balanced life. After returning from the world of the soul, Joe Gardner took the initiative to repair his family relationships and responded to the kindness of his friends, demonstrating a renewed sense of self-awareness and a renewed appreciation for human relationships. He no longer considers musical success as the only measure, but enjoys the daily sharing of playing and teaching, highlighting the fact that his behavior follows the regulation accomplished by his new self-awareness. Through these transformations, Joe Gardner achieves a sublimation from utilitarian pursuits to life lessons, finding inner balance and true happiness.

V. CONCLUSION

In *Soul*, the culture of individualism dominates Joe Gardner's behavioral choices in the early stage, emphasizing individual freedom, self-realization and achievement above all else, causing him to sacrifice his rest time and neglect his

family and friends for the sake of his musical dream.

Symbols in *soul* and what they represent.

Symbol	Meaning
22	22 represents innocence and a deep love for life, symbolizing pure emotion. It acts as a mirror, reflecting Joe's utilitarian and desiccated inner world, prompting his dormant self-reflection.
Pizza	Pizza symbolizes small joys and simple pleasures in life. Soul 22's infatuation with pizza makes Joe realize the beauty of ordinary things, initiating a new perception of life's rich meanings.
Falling Leaf	The falling leaf symbolizes the vitality of life and the beauty of nature. Soul 22's appreciation for the leaf helps Joe see the meaning of life in the street scene, leading him to re-examine his attitude towards life.
Street Performer's Song	The street performer's song symbolizes artistic passion in the ordinary and the beauty of life. Soul 22's emotional response to the song makes Joe feel the charm of everyday art, prompting him to redefine art and emotion in life.
Joe Gardner's Fedora	Joe Gardner's fedora is a symbolic representation of his personality and identity. This hat accompanies him not only in the real world but also retains its significance in the spiritual world, becoming a marker of his identity.
"The Zone"	"The Zone" refers to a state of self-forgetfulness. Joe enters this state during his piano performance, symbolizing his complete dedication to music and his persistent pursuit of his dreams.
"Gig"	"Gig" refers to live music performances, especially impromptu performances by musicians. Joe's opportunity to perform with Dorothea symbolizes the realization of his dreams and his long for for a music career.
Family and Friends	Initially, Joe neglects family and friends, but through his interaction with Soul 22, he revalues interpersonal relationships, realizing their importance in life.
Daily Performances and Teaching	Joe shifts from measuring success solely by musical achievements to enjoying daily performances and teaching, symbolizing sublimation from utilitarian pursuits to life insights, finding inner balance and true happiness.

However, through his interaction with 22, Joe Gardner experiences a profound remodeling of his sense of self under the perspective of symbolic interactionism. 22's clueless naiveté and zest for life act as a mirror reflecting Joe Gardner's utilitarian and dry inner world, stimulating his dormant self-reflection. In the transpersonal experience, Joe Gardner's old self-cognition begins to loosen and a new consciousness

sprouts. The ordinary things in the film, such as pizzas and fallen leaves, are transformed from daily objects to symbols carrying the philosophy of life through their interaction and dialogues, opening up Joe Gardner's new perception of the rich meaning of life. 22's perspective and the integration of different values in examining life break through the limitations of the single perspective of personal achievement, and reshape the order of the value of life. After returning to the world of the soul, Joe Gardner took the initiative to repair his family relationships, responded to the kindness of his friends, and no longer considered musical success as the only measure, but rather enjoyed the daily sharing of playing and teaching. This psychological metamorphosis not only enabled him to re-examine his life and values, but also helped him to realize the sublimation from utilitarian pursuit to life perception, and find inner balance and true happiness. The combination of individualistic culture and symbolic interaction theory provides strong theoretical support for dissecting Joe Gardner, a complex film and television character, and reveals the process of psychological growth and behavioral adjustment of individuals in social interaction. Joe Gardner's experience highlights the necessity of social interaction and the integration of multiple values to nourish the individual's spiritual growth and overall development, as the American individualist culture gives the individual the motivation to pursue his or her dreams, but also has the potential disadvantage of spiritual narrowing. The subsequent research can expand the research object to more film and television

texts, explore the influence of symbolic interaction and local culture intertwined with different cultural contexts on characterization, or deepen the level of theoretical integration, introduce new theories to collaboratively analyze the psychology of the characters, and broaden the boundaries of the research. These research directions not only help to understand the characterization in film and television works, but also provide a mirror for the direction of contemporary social and cultural development.

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