

Unveiling character formation in American films: a three-dimensional framework of concealment, conflict, and value

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Abstract. Since the establishment of the Hollywood film industry system, character portrayal has always been a core issue in narrative creation. From the rebellious Scarlett in *Gone with the Wind*, to Andy who adheres to hope in *The Shawshank Redemption*, and then to Arthur who succumbs to madness and despair in *Joker*, American films have constructed emotional connections across cultural barriers through a series of vivid character images. Traditional character analysis mostly focuses on characters' behavioral performances and personality labels, but ignores the logic of character formation constructed by screenwriters behind the scenes. This paper proposes a three-dimensional analytical framework of "Concealment-Conflict-Value", aiming to uncover the methodological black box of character portrayal in American films: Concealment represents the dynamic growth trajectory of characters' personalities, highlighting the iterative realization of roles; Conflict, as a touchstone for personality traits, reveals the essence of characters through the analysis of three dimensions: self, others, and environment; Value is the soul of characters' personalities, determining the direction and realm of roles. The results indicate that applying this framework to analyze classic characters in American films can not only extract replicable creative experiences, but also offer a glimpse into the understanding of human nature and spiritual demands within the context of American culture.

Keywords: American films, character personality development, demand trajectory, countermechanism, value coordinate

1. Introduction

In the context of the ongoing evolution of global film and television creation, American films have long maintained a dominant position in narrative innovation, particularly in character portrayal [1]. As times change and audience tastes evolve, film character creation has gradually shifted from the traditional, one-dimensional portrayal to more complex, multifaceted representations. Contemporary academic studies on character development in American films have increasingly focused on the internal logic of character formation, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between characters, historical contexts, culture, and the social environment. Building on the latest developments in film narrative theory, this paper introduces a three-dimensional analytical framework of "Concealment-Conflict-Value" to systematically decode the methodologies behind character portrayal in American films. This framework not only sheds light on how

characters are crafted but also offers valuable insights for global film character creation, providing a reference point for narrative innovation in international cinema.

2. The character demand trajectory and transformation in American films

The essence of character concealment lies in the shift of the character's demand hierarchy and the transformation of their inner motivation during the course of the story. American screenwriters imply the creative logic of "character is choice, and choice is demand", and through three stages - historical anchoring, demand iteration, and turning point decision - they convert the abstract character transformation into a perceivable narrative trajectory.

2.1. Character evolution and demand progression

The evolution of a character's personality is driven by the development of their internal needs, which evolve as the story progresses. These needs often stem from past traumas or formative experiences, and as they unfold, they shape the character's behavior and motivations. In *The Godfather*, Michael Corleone's transformation begins with the trauma of witnessing his father's shooting, which sparks a subconscious need to protect his family [2]. This need intensifies after the deaths of his father and brother, pushing him from an idealistic outsider to the mafia boss. His change reflects the awakening of deeper psychological needs that drive his actions. In *Good Will Hunting*, Will Hunting's defensive behavior, shaped by childhood trauma, is initially expressed through his intelligence and wit, keeping others at a distance [3]. However, his relationship with psychologist Sean helps him confront his vulnerabilities, transforming him from a guarded genius into a more emotionally open person. In *Forrest Gump*, Forrest's needs evolve from basic survival to self-actualization, with each shift deepening his character, from innocent simplicity to profound loyalty and love [4]. In *Dallas Buyers Club*, Ron Woodroof's needs reverse course: from self-indulgence to survival after his AIDS diagnosis, and ultimately to a need for connection and love [5]. His journey from a "selfish smuggler" to a "selfless advocate" shows how evolving needs can reshape both behavior and core values. The evolution of these characters demonstrates how internal needs are the primary drivers of personality transformation. From Michael Corleone's gradual embrace of power, to Will Hunting's emotional thawing, Forrest Gump's maturation, and Ron Woodroof's moral awakening, each character's growth is shaped by the fulfillment of deeper psychological needs. This progression creates more nuanced, three-dimensional characters whose actions are driven by their evolving internal worlds, providing audiences with a clearer understanding of their motivations and emotional development [6].

2.2. Key choices and character turning points

The turning point in a character's arc often stems from a seemingly insignificant choice, a moment that reveals true character traits. In *The Godfather*, Corleone's turning point comes when he decides to shoot the police chief and the drug lord in the Sicilian restaurant [2]. Previously an outsider, he was reluctant to engage in the family's criminal activities. However, faced with his father's critical condition and the family's imminent collapse, Michael chooses to take on the responsibility of revenge. This decision shifts him from an "idealist" to a "power controller", signaling the emergence of both calm and cruelty in his character. His choice to flee to Sicily marks his assumption of family responsibility and a retreat from his inner conflict, laying the foundation for his eventual complete transformation. In *Good Will Hunting*, the turning point happens when Will rejects his girlfriend Skylar's invitation to move to California [3]. His refusal, underpinned by the lie "I don't love you", exposes his deep-seated fear of abandonment, a fear rooted in past trauma. This decision reveals his

emotional vulnerability, and later, when he drives to California, it signifies his breakthrough in overcoming that fear. In *Forrest Gump*, Forrest's journey follows his need for self-actualization, closely tied to the American Dream [4]. The film shows how Forrest's simple, innocent nature evolves into a deep loyalty and love, reflecting his personal growth and the cultural ideal of individualism. His development mirrors the belief that anyone, regardless of their background, can succeed through persistence and kindness, making his story an embodiment of American values. In contrast, Jay Gatsby's core need in *The Great Gatsby* is to win back love through wealth. His pursuit of the American Dream, embodied by his rise from poverty to riches, critiques the era's materialism. Gatsby's tragic end reveals the destructive effects of this materialism, making his personal journey a larger commentary on cultural values. The arc of his needs highlights how individual desires can symbolize deeper societal issues.

2.3. Anti-hero traits and non-linear trajectories

In recent years, anti-hero characters in American films have exhibited non-linear development, moving away from traditional narrative patterns. These characters often shift between different levels of needs, reflecting their internal conflicts and complex motivations. In *Deadpool*, Wade Wilson's journey shifts from a basic need for survival, such as curing cancer, to a desire for revenge, and ultimately to a more selfless need to protect his loved ones. This shift highlights his contradictory personality, being both indifferent and deeply devoted, which adds to the complexity of his character. Similarly, in *Venom: Let There Be Carnage*, Eddie Brock's needs evolve from personal success to survival, and eventually to the protection of others. His development reflects a tension between selfish instincts and a growing sense of responsibility. This constant shift between needs underscores his multi-dimensional character, combining weakness, strength, selfishness, and heroism. These non-linear trajectories reflect the inner conflicts that drive the characters and make their development unpredictable. Anti-heroes do not follow a clear path of growth or redemption. Instead, their shifting motivations create dynamic character arcs that challenge traditional narrative structures. These evolving needs keep the audience engaged and emphasize the contradictions within the characters, offering a more nuanced view of heroism and character development.

3. The three-dimensional construction of anti-hero personality traits: personality features and confrontation mechanisms in American films

If the demand trajectory represents the growth path of a character's personality, then the resistance mechanism is the "stress tester" of that personality. In this regard, American film screenwriters are particularly skilled at crafting three distinct arenas of conflict: internal, relational, and external. By placing characters in extreme situations, they force them to reveal their true personality traits through these conflicts. This multi-dimensional design of resistance allows the character's personality to transcend flat, stereotypical portrayals, revealing a complex and multifaceted nature [7].

3.1. Inner conflict: personality evolution through self-contradiction

The complexity of a character's personality often stems from inner value conflicts, especially the contradiction between the "ideal self" and the "real self". This inner conflict becomes the core driving force behind the character's personal development, pushing their actions and emotions to evolve continuously. For example, in *Joker*, Arthur's ideal self is that of a comedian who brings joy to others, but in reality, he is a socially abandoned individual suffering from mental illness and living in poverty [8]. The vast gap between his ideal and real self triggers intense inner turmoil, ultimately transforming Arthur from a "mild-mannered mentally ill

man" into a "deranged criminal". Similarly, in *Breaking Bad*, Walter's ideal self is a successful chemist, but due to the limitations of his character, he missed the opportunities for fame and wealth [9]. As an ordinary chemistry teacher, faced with financial difficulties and a cancer diagnosis, he chooses to manufacture drugs to provide for his family. Behind this decision lies a deep struggle between "family duty" and "personal ambition". This struggle ultimately leads to Walter's character evolving into a "ruthless drug kingpin", in stark contrast to his original image as a "gentle teacher". Their experiences both prove that inner conflict is often the key driving force behind a character's personality transformation. This inner self-contradiction reveals the deep-seated conflicts within the character's personality, further giving their behavior a complex, multifaceted nature. By depicting this self-contradiction, screenwriters can allow characters to undergo self-overcoming and personality transformation through continuous psychological struggle, making them more three-dimensional and dynamic.

3.2. Interpersonal conflict: personality shaping through relationships

The individual is the sum of social relationships, and the development of one's personal identity and role is inseparable from interactions and conflicts with others. In this light, American screenwriters excel at crafting complex networks of character relationships, allowing characters' personalities to be mirrored and shaped through their confrontations with one another. In *The Godfather*, the relationship between Michael and his father, Vito, exemplifies typical interpersonal interaction [2]. Vito, guided by "Sicilian family ethics", maintains the family's power through gentleness, while Michael, embodying the "American logic of power", believes ruthless tactics are necessary. Vito hopes Michael will protect the family through politics, but Michael sees it as a tool for power and ultimately takes over the family business. Michael's cold rationality aligns with the Mafia world, and Vito's dying words, "*Don't let anyone know what you're thinking*", acknowledge his son's character. In *Good Will Hunting*, the relationship between Will and Sean also serves as a classic example of interpersonal interaction. Sean's core personality is defined by "empathy and tolerance", which helps him overcome his own depression through his connection with Will [3]. In contrast, Will exhibits "rebellion and defensiveness", using sharp words to protect himself. Their therapy dynamic of "defense versus breakthrough" illustrates how their personalities influence one another. Will challenges Sean's views with intellect, while Sean disarms Will's defenses with personal insight. This process of mutual shaping becomes evident when Will opens up, showing that personality growth often arises from interactions and conflicts within relationships.

3.3. External conflict: impact of environment and visual confrontation

Environment is a key factor in shaping characters' personalities. In American films, screenwriters often place characters in extreme environments, using environmental pressure to reveal and temper their personality traits. This external conflict not only reflects the characters' survival ability, but also highlights their personality transformation when facing environmental challenges. Contemporary film creation pays more attention to the integration of environmental setting and character portrayal, and strengthens the expression effect of external conflict with the help of visual language. Andy Dufresne's tenacious personality in *The Shawshank Redemption* is shaped in the harsh prison environment [10]. Initially, he resisted by advocating prisoners' rights and expanding the library, but after the ineffectiveness of violence, he turned to the strategy of forbearance and waiting. This transformation stems from the forced growth in the extreme environment. Finally, Andy not only achieved physical escape, but also got rid of the spiritual "institutionalization" and became the embodiment of hope. Hugh Glass completes his personality transformation in the cold and cruel wilderness in *The Revenant* [11]. Driven by revenge, he transforms from a hunter seeking revenge to an

"individual who reveres life, reflecting the shaping effect of the extreme environment on personality. While overcoming natural challenges, Glass also overcomes his inner desire for revenge. In addition, the progress of modern film technology, especially the development of special effects and visual presentation, makes external conflict more intuitively impactful. In *Avatar*, the visual contrast between Jake Sully's human form and Avatar form highlights his identity transformation; Doctor Strange externalizes the characters' internal conflicts through special effects. These visual elements make the character transformation more dynamic and immediate. It can be seen that external conflict not only provides a background for the characters' survival challenges, but also drives the development of their personalities. Both the extreme environment and the visualized presentation of conflicts have profoundly shaped the multi-dimensional personalities of the characters.

4. Multi-dimensional calibration of value coordinates and the meaning loop of role traits

The ultimate destination of a character's arc is the calibration and sublimation of value coordinates. To accomplish this, American screenwriters follow three stages: the anchoring of initial values, the reconstruction of values in conflict, and the sublimation of final values. Through these steps, screenwriters imbue the character's personality with universal meaning that transcends the individual. This process of value calibration transforms the character's personality from isolated individual traits into a reflection of the spirit of the times and a carrier of cultural needs [12].

4.1. Anchoring of initial values and personality formation

The initial value of a character is the psychological foundation of its personality, which determines the direction of the character's behavior and the source of its motivation. The classic characters in American movies often have an initial value closely linked to cultural genes and personal experiences. For example, in *Forrest Gump*, Forrest's initial value is "loyalty and kindness", a value instilled by his mother, who imparts to him that he is just like everyone else, teaching him to view the world with a kind heart [4]. As a result, this initial value shapes Forrest's personality. In turn, his loyalty to Jenny, his commitment to Bubba, and his cross-country run all serve as reflections of his loyalty and kindness. Despite enduring hardships such as war, betrayal, and death, Forrest remains true to these values, which ultimately make him a symbol of the "American Dream", revealing that with loyalty and kindness, one can achieve success in life. In *The Godfather*, Vito Corleone's initial value is "family honor", which stems from his Sicilian immigrant background [2]. In traditional culture of Sicily, family honor is above everything else, and Vito. Using his wisdom and courage, he grew from a street vendor to a mafia boss, and all his actions were aimed at protecting the family's honor. This initial value anchors Vito's personality direction: his "gentleness" and "cruelty" to protect the family, his "human debt" strategy also serves to consolidate the family's position. Vito's personality is essentially the product of the collision between Sicilian culture and American society.

4.2. Value reconstruction and personality transformation in conflict

In situations where characters face extreme conflict, their initial values are often challenged and even overturned. This process of value reconstruction is a key stage in the transformation of a character's personality. In *Breaking Bad*, Walter White's initial value is family responsibility. His motivation for manufacturing methamphetamine is to secure a fortune for his family. However, as his power grew, Walter's value system gradually shifted. In this process, beneath the facade of "family responsibility", there lay a

hidden desire for "power". When Walter said, "I did all this not for my family, but for myself", his initial value completely collapses, and his personality shifts from a "gentle teacher" to a "ruthless drug lord". This process of value reconstruction imparts a "tragic" quality to Walter's personality. In essence, he is originally an oppressed man, but in his pursuit of power, he lost himself. Moreover, in *The Dark Knight*, Arthur Fleck's initial value is "bringing joy to the world". He aspires to become a comedian, using his performances to heal others. However, after being abandoned by society and mocked by his idols, his initial value begins to crumble. After the subway killings, Arthur's value system undergoes a complete reconstruction. He no longer believes that "kindness will be rewarded", but instead thinks that "madness is the only way to heal the world". This process of value reconstruction transforms his personality from a "gentle mentally ill person" into a "crazy criminal"; and his personality transformation is essentially a critique of the indifference and cruelty of capitalist society [8].

4.3. Sublimation of final values and the transcendence of meaning

The classic characters in American films often reach their ultimate value through a series of character arcs. These arcs involve a progression from personal values to universal values, as well as from individual fate to broader societal issues. In *The Shawshank Redemption*, Andy Dufresne's ultimate value is "hope" [10]. After spending twenty years in prison, Andy uses a small hammer to drill through thick walls and covers his secret with a poster. And his actions are not just about gaining his own freedom; they are about passing on the spark of "hope". When Andy writes to Red, saying, "*Hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies*", his ultimate value is sublimated: hope is not only a personal spiritual pillar, but also humanity's eternal strength in the face of suffering. Andy's personality thus becomes a symbol of "hope", thus transcending the boundaries of time and culture [7]. In *Good Will Hunting*, Will Hunting's ultimate value is "self-acceptance" [3]. Due to his childhood trauma, Will is unable to accept his flaws, and as a result, he uses rebellious behavior to mask his inner vulnerability. But with Sean's help, Will gradually learns to accept himself, including his past, his flaws, and his talents. Thus, when Will drives off to California, his ultimate value is sublimated. Self-acceptance is not about compromising with fate; it is about respecting life. Will's personality transformation thus becomes a model of "healing from trauma", bringing spiritual comfort to countless viewers.

5. Insights into character portrayal techniques in American films

5.1. The synergy and fusion of technology and art

The maturity of the American film industry is reflected through the synergy of technology and art. Hollywood has industrialized character creation through standardized processes, yet screenwriters still manage to integrate their unique creative visions within this framework. By using tools such as the needs profile, oppositional triangle model, and value coordinates method, character personalities are systematized, while writers infuse their own distinctive contributions [13]. For example, Arthur's pathological smile in *Joker* and Forrest's distinctive running style in *Forrest Gump* allow the characters to break free from the industrialized model and form distinct personalities [4, 8]. This blend of standardization and personalization highlights how, within an industrialized framework, a balance between structured processes and creative individuality is achieved, driving innovation and diversity in film character development [14].

5.2. The continuation and development of cross-media narrative

With the rise of transmedia storytelling, film character creation pays more and more attention to the balance between continuity and innovation. Contemporary research on transmedia storytelling points out that maintaining the continuity of the core traits of characters while realizing personality evolution is the key to the success of transmedia character creation [15]. In the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), Tony Stark/Iron Man has always maintained the core traits of "genius, arrogance, and responsibility" from *Iron Man* to *Avengers: Endgame*, reflecting the continuity of the character. But in different films, Tony's personality continues to evolve: he becomes more gentle after becoming a father, shows fear in the face of Thanos, and his character arc presents dynamic growth, achieving innovative breakthroughs. In this way, transmedia storytelling not only ensures the consistency of characters, but also endows them with new emotional dimensions and growth trajectories, maintaining the audience's emotional connection and enhancing the appeal of characters [16, 17].

5.3. The breakthroughs and innovation in cultural diversity

In recent years, American films have begun to move away from traditional "white-centric" perspectives and focus on the expression of cultural diversity [18, 19]. In *Black Panther*, the character of T'Challa merges African traditional culture with modern heroism. He is both the king of Wakanda, committed to tribal duties, and a global hero dedicated to saving the world. This character creation breaks the stereotypical portrayal of African characters in Hollywood films, presenting new possibilities for character creation in the context of cultural diversity. Similarly, Rachel Chu in *Crazy Rich Asians* embodies the clash and fusion of Eastern and Western cultures. Raised in America with Western ideals of independence, she must also adapt to Eastern family ethics. Through the development of these two characters, the films explore the theme of cultural identity, driving innovation in character creation within cross-cultural contexts and presenting richer social and cultural meanings [20].

6. Conclusion

Based on the internal logic of character portrayal in American films, this paper constructs a three-dimensional analytical framework of "Concealment-Conflict-Value". By disassembling classic film cases, it systematically decodes the core creative logic of the evolution of character need trajectories, the threefold conflict mechanism, and the calibration of value coordinates, and extracts key techniques such as the collaboration of technology and art, the balance of transmedia storytelling, and the integration of cultural diversity. Research shows that this framework can effectively reveal the secrets of shaping three-dimensional and full characters in American films, and provide a referenceable methodology for global film and television character creation to break through the misunderstanding of labeling. This paper has certain limitations: the cases mostly focus on classic mainstream works, the coverage of niche genres and marginal theme films in recent years is insufficient, and the adaptability of the framework in non-American cultural contexts has not been fully verified. In the future, we will expand the scope of cases, include more diverse theme works, combine film and television creation practices in different cultural backgrounds to further optimize the universality of the framework, and at the same time refine the specific application paths of the framework in the context of transmedia storytelling to deepen the practical value of the research.

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