

Mirroring Vulnerability: Fear and Shame in *The Judge*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the estranged father-son relationship in the 2014 American drama film *The Judge* and explores how the protagonist, Judge Palmer, and his son, Hank, negotiate between their remorse at failing to form filial attachment and their continued defiance towards reconciliation. Both characters appear to mirror one another's emotional disconnection as each isolates himself in a cocoon of invisibility and lack of interaction. This mirroring gesture is a motif that recurs throughout the film, making evident the internal and external conflicts of the narrative. The finding of the study indicates that the judge's fear and shame i.e. his inner conflict, is rooted in the numbing of his emotions towards his second son. The finding also indicates that only by accepting the aspect of fear and shame does the protagonist learn to admit both his past failure and his current estrangement from his son. This recognition of his fear and shame, as the investigation illustrates, leads to a recognition of his vulnerability. The construct of vulnerability used in this discussion can be defined as the empowering awareness of one's fragility in the face of conflict. Judge Palmer's acknowledgement of his fear and shame allowed him to understand and recognise the conflict he faced with his son, Hank. The implication of this reading is that when each man embraces his fear and shame through a sense of awareness of his past failures, the filial conflict between them begins to be resolved and the estrangement between the father and son appears to mend.

Keywords: Fear, shame, vulnerability, numbing, mirroring, *The Judge*

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INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the estranged father-son relationship in the 2014 American drama film, *The Judge*, and explores how the protagonist, Judge Palmer, and his middle son, Hank, negotiate between their

remorse at failed filial attachment and their continued defiance towards reconciliation. Both characters appear to mirror one another's emotional disconnection as each isolates himself in a cocoon of invisibility and lack of interaction. This mirroring gesture is a motif that recurs throughout the film, allowing the internal and external conflicts of the narrative to be evident. Using the twin conflicts of fear and shame taken from the lens of vulnerability, this study problematises the position held by both characters that perpetuate their estrangement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The father-and-son relationship is paramount to the development of a son's character, which included his emotional and psychological make-up (Vogt & Sirridge, 1991). In a healthy father-son relationship, as the latter grows up, the former takes on the role of a model patriarch. However, any barrier in their relationship caused either by emotional or psychological disengagement can disrupt the dynamics in the relationship. The film, *The Judge*, attempts to address the problematic of a dysfunctional father-son relationship due to a shared failure in their past. This failure, as we will discuss later, creates an unwanted effect on the father-son relationship. Instead of a father who is a filial role model, the patriarch in this film is acknowledged by the son purely for his professional role as a judge in a court of law.

As stated by Raven Clabough (2014:np), the film focusses on the "complicated relationship of a father and son," which

forms both the internal and the external conflict of the narration. Clabough expands that the "father/son dynamic" between Judge Palmer and his son Hank Palmer is rooted in each not being able to relate to the other. Clabough (2014:np), in another article also discusses the impact of a strong or weak father-son relationship within the latter's own family: "It is often so vital for a son to respect his father and to feel respected in order for him to be a good husband and father in his own family." A healthy father-son relationship generates a virtuous cycle that manifests in the latter's own future family.

Besides that, Denny Wayman (2014) in his article discusses the motif of the father-son relationship in popular films as a source of identity formation. As Wayman (2014) states, "The troubled father-son relationship has been a staple in literature and film. It portrays the universal struggle that all sons experience to some extent to gain their father's approval while at the same time finding their own distinct masculine identity." The popularity of the theme of estrangement between the father and son indicates its currency among movie-goers today. In addition, Wayman (2014:np) also states that the switching of roles between the filial and the professional, as seen in *The Judge*, further complicates the relationship between the main characters: "A harsh and opinionated man, Joseph has three sons who all call him 'Judge'. It is this absorption of his profession into his identity that creates the troubled relationship with all three of his sons."

Current reviews make it apparent that the film is recognised mainly for the central conflict between Judge Palmer and his son. Yet, what drives the wedge between them? The gap filled by the current discussion is in the aspect of estrangement and its effects on the development of the characters in the film. In order to facilitate the discussion, two important constructs in identity development and interpersonal conflicts, namely fear and shame, will be utilised. To what extent is fear and shame the root of the internal and external conflict in the film?

METHOD

The methodology of this paper incorporates the two important constructs of fear and shame, which together create the twin conflicts of the film. Fear is seen as a “biologically basic emotion” that can be found in humans as well as in animals (Adolphs, 2013, p.81). The emotion of fear is triggered when an individual feels that he/she is in danger. In an earlier study on fear, Mark Schaller, Justin H. Park and Annette Mueller (2003, p.637) identify one of the fundamental functions of this emotion:

A fearful reaction to dangerous things is one of the most fundamental of human experiences. The emotional experience of fear almost certainly has deep evolutionary roots and still serves the useful function of compelling individuals to vigilantly avoid those things.

In a more recent study, Brown (In Brown & Winfrey, 2013) defined fear as “a

powerful and complex emotion” that pushes an individual into a cocoon of darkness, making him/her appear psychologically and emotionally weak and alone. In the film, Judge Joseph Palmer’s fear is rooted in his middle son’s reckless behaviour as an adolescent. Hank’s unruly behaviour, which began at the age of 13, escalated at the age of 17 when he got into a car accident, inflicting long-term injury on his brother and thus permanently destroying the latter’s chances of being a major-league baseball player. Judge Palmer presided over his own son’s case and took the difficult decision of sending his son to a juvenile detention centre as punishment. As a parent, his fear for his son’s future, given the latter’s reckless behaviour left him with little choice but to take this drastic measure to curb the latter’s potentially destructive tendencies. However, the repercussion of that act creates a strong sense of guilt in the Palmer as a result of what he sees as his failure as a father, and put a permanent wedge in their relationship.

Shame, according to scholars of vulnerability studies, inflicts a physical sensation akin to pain. As Brown elaborates, “The importance of social acceptance and connection is reinforced by our brain chemistry, and the pain that results from social rejection and disconnection is a real pain” (Brown, 2012, p.71). In the film, the issue of shame, albeit significant, is dealt with the same level of emphasis that illustrates the disregard people generally have for it. It is this disregard that inadvertently creates the chasm between the two characters. Only by approaching shame with a sense of resilience can we transcend the experience

and use it to mature in our emotional and psychological temperament. According to Brown (2012, p.61), "Shame resilience is key to embracing our vulnerability." This paper focuses on the theme of shame as a central conflict in the story and investigates the extent this theme is problematised in this popular film.

DISCUSSION

One such example of "social rejection and disconnection" (Brown, 2012, p.61) that leads to shame is estrangement between family members. In the film, the guilt and shame that Judge Palmer experiences as a result of putting his son in a juvenile detention centre causes him to be emotionally disengaged from Hank throughout his adulthood. As he says in a later scene, Hank reminds him of a delinquent he despised. Thus the father's disassociation from his son is mirrored by the son's disconnection from the family until the death of his mother. The film opens with Hank getting a voice message from his family informing him of his mother's passing. Hank travels back to his home town after being away for over two decades to meet his family and to bury his mother. Now a successful defence lawyer, Hank enters the family home on an equal footing with his father, a judge. As members of the legal fraternity, they uphold the law and create space for the accused to be proven innocent or guilty. Yet, the past transgressions by both characters in inflicting emotional pain on one another remain silenced. The shame

that continues to colour their reception of each other is not spoken of, thus creating for a strong theme of estrangement at the beginning of their encounter.

Estrangement from family causes an individual to feel emotionally and psychologically unrooted, disengaged and isolated. The "emotional cutoff" (Bowen, 1976, p.84), which dictates "the way people handle their unresolved emotional attachment to their parents," is clearly visible in Hank's attitude towards his father when he first returns to Indiana. Likewise, the judge's first reaction when meeting his son after the long separation also indicates a distinct emotional cutoff. Both characters appear to mirror one another's emotional disconnection as each isolates himself in a cocoon of invisibility and lack of self-expression. Akin to Lacan's mirror stage development of a person's ego (Martin, 2006, p.151), the mirroring as used in this discussion signals how each character sub-consciously reflects the attitude of the other. The father's emotional detachment towards Hank is mirrored by the son's equal disassociation from forging strong interpersonal relationship with the father. This mirroring of one another is a motif that recurs throughout the film. The emotional detachment is relevant to the discussion of fear and shame; shame is seen as "the fear of disconnection" (Brown, 2012, p.68). For the rest of his short stay at home, Hank and the judge encounter numerous episodes where they are forced to forge connections as two adults and face up to their fear and shame of the past.

Shame, seen as an aspect that makes us feel vulnerable, is a form of “feelings” (Wheeler 1997, p.223) that has the capacity to demoralise an individual by framing him as unworthy, flawed and a failure. In the film, the judge develops a negative perception about his inability to have been emotionally available for his son when the latter was a troubled adolescent. Moreover, the judge, dictated by social conformity and the pressures of upholding the rule of law, remains aloof and detached from his son for the latter’s misdemeanours, even as an adult. As Brown (2012, p.92) explains, in men, shame is manifested in many ways and one such way is to perceive it as a sign of weakness: “Shame happens when people think you’re soft. It’s degrading and shamming to be seen as anything but tough. ... Basically, shame is weakness.” In the film, the judge sets out to appear formidable by exercising the rule of law on his middle son when he is convicted of a crime. Albeit only doing his job, the guilt he feels as a result develops into shame. Unable to express his feelings, the judge experiences the classic encounter most men have with shame: “stop feeling, start earning, put everyone in their place and climb their way to the top or die trying” (Brown, 2012, p.107). When shame becomes the accepted reality of the judge’s established self, he is consumed by the yoke of being the perfect judge. Judge Palmer begins to yield to the liminality of the space within which he lives and begins to rely on his professional image as his only form of identification. The illustration can be seen when they first meet

after a long hiatus and his son addresses him as “Judge,” and not ‘dad’ or father. The title thus signals a detachment from personal relations for a public one. Yet, is the father solely responsible for his uncompromising nature towards his son?

Hank’s strong rebellious nature forces the judge to use the authoritative method of parenting. Both characters unknowingly reflect a ‘mirror’ projection of their sense of individuation for each other as each is equally adamant and intent on dominating the other. Simultaneously, the image of Judge Palmer as an authoritative and respectable figure of the law is mirrored by his son’s equally shrewd ability to defend the guilty. This ability is put to the test when Hank takes up the case that will make him face up to his own fear and shame. According to Brown (2012), shame is the negative and darker manifestation of the recesses of the mind that seeks to subjugate and deter the progress of life. Hank’s shame is that despite being a successful lawyer, his success is not recognised by his family. Decades after graduating with a degree in law, Hank informs his father, the judge, that he had in fact successfully graduated as the best in his class. His family had not been privy to the information as they were not then a part of his life. He is still the juvenile who broke the law and destroyed his elder brother’s chances of a baseball career. The guilt and shame continue to haunt Hank for much of his adult life. The emotional detachment, subsequently, leaves Hank perpetually vulnerable in all his interpersonal long-term relationships.

Yet, surprisingly, his relationship with his daughter appears healthy.

As the narrative advances, the estranged and corrosive relationship between the judge and Hank becomes evident. However, as fate would have it, the judge meets with an accident that causes the death of a man he had previously put in prison. The judge is ironically to stand trial for first-degree murder and his defence attorney is unable to defend him well. At this juncture of the narrative, the judge breaks free from the emotional 'armour' that he had built against his son and accepts his son's service as an attorney. The judge had created the emotional 'armour' by numbing his feelings towards his son, thus creating a disconnection between him and his son. Numbing our feeling is seen as a disturbing act as it freezes our feelings and emotions to "experience love, joy, belonging, creativity and empathy" (Brown, 2012, p.137). Albeit convenient, the disconnection that was seen previously in the relationship between Judge Palmer and his son, Hank, appears to be temporarily resolved through a mutual act of 'responding' to the other without judgement. The process of responding as coined by Brown (2012, p.201) can be understood as "the heart of the feedback process." Yet, the unconventional way in which the resolution between the Judge and Hank is achieved speaks to the schism in their relationship. In the scene, Hank offers the judge a piece of paper as a contract between client and attorney.

The paper is symbolic of a temporary reconciliation that Hank appears to offer by

taking up his father's case. Hank offers his services through an agreement that provides his legal services pro bono. His father responds to the offer favourably and this begins a new chapter in their relationship where the son now is the father's defence attorney. Again, the unconventional manner in which their relationship is rekindled signals the continued rupture in the father-son dynamics.

The judge's actions inadvertently indicate his fear. Only by recognising his fear of being accused of first-degree murder is the judge able to engage his son's legal assistance. Fear in this case is a strong catalyst to transit from an estranged relationship to temporary reconciliation. Yet, the shame of his son's past actions continues to cripple the judge when it comes to forming emotional attachment. His indifference towards Hank, even in the face of a potential first-degree murder conviction, is uncompromising. In the current circumstance of their defendant-attorney relationship, the issue of shame begins to unravel. How long can shame be the barrier that separates filial relationship?

The sense of vulnerability is further expanded in this film when Hank accidentally finds out that his father is dying of cancer. Death creates a finality that allows for fear and shame to transcend. In a scene when the judge is ill following a chemotherapy session, Hank comes into the bathroom and helps his father without any sense of remorse or hatred. The judge is at his weakest and most vulnerable moment, as he defecates uncontrollably all over the bathroom floor.

As a highly respected and revered member of society, seeing himself in this manner would surely cause the judge shame. Yet, his inability to physically function without support finally allows him to resolve his sense of shame and he subsequently gives in to Hank's assistance. It would seem that the vulnerability demonstrated by the judge in his hour of need is mirrored again by his son's susceptibility to act with compassion and kindness towards someone weaker. Is physical weakness the answer to overcoming fear and shame? Is Judge Palmer able to embrace his emotional and psychological vulnerability only after becoming physically helpless? The notion of shame resilience, described by Brown (2012, p.98), is evident in this scene: "Shame resilience, ... is about finding a middle path, an option that allows us to stay engaged and to find the emotional courage we need to respond in a way that aligns with our values." It would appear that with a weakened physical body, the Judge is able to step out of his fear and shame and allow his son to see him as he truly is, vulnerable and in need of assistance. Likewise, Hank too is able to transcend 'emotional detachment' and develop 'emotional courage' to respond to his father, not as a judge, rather as a fellow human in need of assistance.

However, that connection is put to the test later when Hank questions the judge on the stand during his trial. Knowing that the judge has been receiving treatment for cancer for many months, Hank uses the information to show that his father was suffering from memory lapse due to the after

effect of chemotherapy and as such cannot be accused of intentionally inflicting harm on another. This action by Hank angers the judge, who has kept the illness a secret from everyone. Hank's fear for his father is mirrored by the judge's fear of being found out. If he is found to be incompetent, the cases that he presided over since being diagnosed with cancer could be reviewed and his reputation as a judge would be forever tarnished.

Seen from the lens of vulnerability, the judge's susceptibility is in his need to do the right thing and to own up to his mistakes. The construct of vulnerability used in this context can be defined as the empowering awareness of one's fragility in the face of conflict (Brown, 2012). As such, when questioned by the prosecution, he admits to wanting to kill the man, but is not able to remember actually committing the act. Hank's vulnerability, on the other hand, is rooted in his current emotional attachment to his father. Like his brothers, Hank does not want his father to be sent to prison and as such is willing to create reasonable doubt to get the judge acquitted. The mirroring of one another's vulnerability rooted in each one's values and choices creates for an engaging climax to the film.

The resolution of this film extends the theme of vulnerability by showing how each character continues to mirror one another's need to accept the other for who he is. Upon his father's compassionate release from prison seven months after being sentenced for second-degree murder, Hank takes his father on a fishing trip. In mirroring his son's

attempts to reconcile, while in the boat, the judge offers his acknowledgement of Hank's ability as a defence attorney. As he says to Hank, if he had to choose a lawyer to be on his team, he would choose Hank. The gesture is a final attempt by the judge to mend the filial estrangement the only way he knows. In embracing his son for who he is and what he has become, that is, a great defence attorney, the father appears to reconcile his differences with his son and accepts him for the man he has become.

CONCLUSION

The implication of the current reading of the film *The Judge* is that in embracing his vulnerability through a sense of awareness of his past fear and shame, the central character is able to break the mental and psychological barrier that cripples him as a father. Both Judge Palmer and his son, Hank, embrace their fear and shame of the past by voicing out their personal afflictions and damaging experiences that have thus far caused them both to be fragmented and embittered as adults. Although both are successful in their respective professions, as father and son, their dysfunctional filial relationship points to their inability to embrace the fear and shame they suffer as a result of past mistakes. Only upon accepting that he is vulnerable and in need of his son's legal help is the judge able to embrace his shame of filial failure. Likewise, only by acknowledging his vulnerability towards emotional attachment is Hank able to transcend his detachment from his father and embrace his insecurities as a man. The

interdependency and mutual understanding between the father and son pave the way for reconciliation. However, it would appear that the trigger for acceptance of vulnerability is the eminent death of the judge. Perhaps current popular films are still discovering possible ways to overcome estrangement in filial relationship, and vulnerability continues to reflect our need to appear formidable despite our mortality. The film does indicate that like all human encounters, filial estrangement is not easily resolved and in the end, each adult needs to develop his own sense of resilience and not simply mirror the reaction of others.

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