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Negation of Archetypal Hero in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*

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Letter of Approval

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Abstract

This research paper investigates Viet Thanh Nguyen's novel The Sympathizer, which counteracts the concept of archetypal heroes by depicting the protagonist in his narrative. In the novel, the historical interaction between the protagonist and the Vietnamese-American war situation brings a different perspective to the war and its consequences. The unnamed protagonist is a narrator. He is an Americanized Vietnamese with double mind. By using such protagonist, Nguyen subverts the portrayal of the archetypal hero in the novel. It seeks the reason about narrator's presentation is different from the heroic characteristics of traditional novels. This research paper uses Northrop Frye's five heroic model concepts clarified in "Anatomy of Criticism" and portrays the protagonist as a modern hero to prove Frye's ironic intentions and proves Thanh's hero as an antihero. His modern heroes are lower than normal people, so they are anti-heroes. The protagonist does not portray his heroism, and readers feel the need for heroism. Instead, he gets rid of the difficult situation of heroism that people expected. The captain as the protagonist is similar to Northrop Frye's satirical hero, an anti-hero. In addition, this paper also discusses Joseph Campbell's concept of the journey of archetypal heroes called 'monomyth' by world mythology. Nguyen views the concept of war situation from a different perspective through his anti-hero.

Keywords: characterization, modern hero, irony, anti-hero, scrutiny, war, identity

This research work projects the importance of characterization in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2016). It also explores the chief character, a nameless protagonist's connection with the theme of the Vietnam War from the point of view of a character who is subversive, a foreign exchange student, a military captain, a communist mole, a motherless child, a refugee, a film consultant, and a prisoner of war. Besides, it enquires why the author considers narrating protagonist more an anti-hero than a hero in the traditional sense of the term.

In *Elements of Literature : Essay, Drama, Poetry, Novel, Film*, Robert Scholes explains, "characters unlike other elements in the fiction –title, prologue, opening, narration, point of view, voice, dialogue, chronology, and plot carries serious themes in the fiction. Characters may be real persons, historical ones, alter ego of the writers or fictitious persons as well. Writers speak to their characters and convey the message they want to convey among readers. Novelists and filmmakers often present characters through their behavior, appearance, speech and gestures, body expressions and names" (14). Generally, characters are developed in two ways. In some novels, the reader is told about the characters. The third-person narrator provides information to readers; information about the role's behavior and thinking, experience, appearance, dressing style, etc. They also make judgments about specific roles and their behaviors. Among others, the first-person narrator also introduced us or other roles.

In the fictional narrative, the protagonist is the main character of the reader's interest. They are active supporters of policies and campaigns, especially those who try to change negative social doctrines. Not only they try to change this dogma, but they also advise other members of society to do so. They disregarded their own interests, the welfare of family members and other interests, and struggled with the negative principles of their own society. They usually sacrifice their lives for the

benefit of the people in society without hesitation. They are regarded as social role models for society. They often play the role of rescuers. Readers believe that the protagonist can rebuild and restore the situation from any danger. They have accomplished amazing feats to prove that they are different from other ordinary people in society. The protagonist proves that he is superior by resolving the conflict between his opponents in the fiction.

In fiction, antagonists are presented in contrast to protagonists. They oppose protagonists' ways through negative accomplishments. Their principles do not match with those of the protagonists and it takes the form of the conflict. Unlike protagonists, antagonists egg on the innocent people of the societies and lead them towards descend. They are self-centered and hostile. They create obstruction in the path of the protagonists in creating the ideal societies. They do not care the social, moral and legal norms and values. Protagonists are tortured by the antagonists and so are the common people of the society. Antagonists create tumult in the society by obstructing the social norms and values at one side by torturing the common people on the other. It is antagonists who take the conflict to the climax in the fiction and it is the protagonists' responsibilities to resolve the climax. Antagonists justify the role of protagonists in the fiction.

Sometimes, protagonists are considered as godly characters in the fiction whereas antagonists as demonic. Protagonists try to prove themselves as a well wisher of the society because of their deeds they show in the fiction and antagonists as demonic for their evil attitudes, behaviors and other features as such. Both the characters are important in the fiction because of the presence of one another. It is antagonists who give the plot the direction to move forward by creating the conflict in the fiction. Various conflicts take the plot to the climax of the fiction. It is

protagonists who settle the apex in the negative direction and allow the normal people breathe the air of happiness. It is protagonists who improve the pathetic conditions of the common people of the society and lead the society towards the normal situation. For this due reason, protagonists are very often called the divine figures, whereas antagonists are devils just for torturing the common people, leading the society towards the difficult path and violating the social norms and values.

Protagonists are taken synonymously with heroes. Heroes are actually those who exhibit their bravery and confidence in accomplishing extra-ordinary deeds. The hero is presented as an ideal character that is worth following by the people of the society. The concept of hero is associated with positive attributes. Hero refers to the character that embodies virtues ever since the ancient Greek civilization. In that period, the hero was taken as an ideal person more than ordinary human and less than god. The very concept regarded hero as an ideal who could rescue all human suffering in that human world. The hero is an ideal image of every person. The word 'hero', however, brings to mind different things to different people, since people tend to have different concepts of heroism. This is particularly the case with regard to the concept of hero in ancient and modern societies. Joseph Campbell justifies the purposes of hero is to save a people, a person, or to protect an ideal. Hero sacrifices himself for something, and this constituted his morality. The good for the other is above everything, even his own needs, to take risks and make a difference in the world where he lives. He explains, "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: The hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man"(12).

With these discussions, the hero can be described as a brave man who

deliberately set out to conquer obstacles for the benefit of others with his extraordinary achievements. It may be a fact that both ancient heroes and modern heroes have certain characteristics, such as bravery and selflessness. These characteristics form the basis of heroic actions, which remain unchanged over time. However, it is important to note that the concept of a modern hero cannot be limited to the author's specific goals. Different writers show modern heroes in their literary works for different purposes. However, it seems that heroes of all ages have some common characteristics that control the concept of heroes. Since the birth of the hero concept, it has changed over time. Therefore, different hero models were created.

In *The Anatomy of Criticism* Northrop Frye proposed five fictional models based on the image of heroes, and drew insights from Aristotelian theory of character. It relates how the protagonist is portrayed to the rest of humanity and the protagonist's environment. Frye suggests that Classical civilizations progressed historically through the development of these modes. He considers that contemporary fiction may be undergoing a return to myth, completing a full circle through the five modes. The first, mythical mode deals with acceptance into the society of gods. In this mode, the protagonist is superior to other people and other similar environments; the hero is the god, such as Jesus Christ in the Bible, the prophet of Muhammad the Ortiran in the Bible, and Orpheus in Greek mythology. This mode can be related as Lord Krishna in Hindu Mythology. Frye claims, "If superior in kind both to other men and to the environment of other men, the hero is a divine being, and the story about him will be a myth in the common sense of a story about a god. Such stories have an important place in literature.." (33). In this fictional work model, the hero has a higher influence, and the narrative about him is a myth in common sense about the story of a god or a demigod. Second, when the character of a fictional work is superior to other men and

environment in degree, the hero is the figure of romance or legend, such as King Arthur or Sir Gawain. He Explains " If superior in degree to other men and to his environment, the hero is the typical hero of romance, whose actions are marvellous but who is himself identified as a human being"(33).In this fictional mode, heroes are human beings who appear in legends or folk tales. Third, in the high mimetic mode, the hero is a leader who is superior to others to some extent, and has greater passion and power than ordinary people. Like "Oedipus" and "Othello", the heroes of Aristotelians epic and tragedy also fell due to their own flaws.Fyre adds, "If superior in degree to other men but not to his natural, the hero is a leader. He has authority, passions, and powers of expression far greater than ours, but what he does is subject both to social criticism and to the order of nature"(34). Fourth is the low mimetic mode. In this mode, heroes are neither superior to ordinary people, nor inferior to ordinary people, such as *Tess* (1891) and Nathaniel in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of d'Urvilles* and Hester Branney in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). In the novels of the 18th and 19th centuries, heroes as virtuous humans encountered tragic death.Fyre Claims, " If superior neither to other men nor to his environment, the hero is one of us: we respond to a sense of his common humanity, and demand from the poet the same canons of probability that we find in our own experience. This gives us the hero of the low mimetic mode" (34).Lastly, the hero is inferior to ordinary men in power and intelligence, in the ironic mode. In the ironic mode, the hero is represented by Murphy in Samuel Beckett's *Murphy* (1938), Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1951) in the twentieth-century. In Frye's model, the fictional mode is determined by the hero's specific role and conditions in the fictional world, and the fictional world is the embodiment of the real world.

Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* deals with the author's attempts to interact with the

history and current situation of the war with Vietnamese Americans in order to clarify the protagonist's complex identity. By speculating on the dual identities of the protagonist, it highlights a new way of viewing the Vietnam War and its aftermath. After analyzing the role's motivation and influence in historical consciousness, Nguyen also pointed out the intention of expressing narratives, which have mixed and hybrid identities, as well as oppressed people and minority groups. In addition, this novel reverses American stereotypes, transcends its historical background, and illuminates a more general theme: the eternal misunderstandings between the East and the West.

The story revolves around narrating the story of the protagonist. The protagonist of the story is the last days of the Vietnam War, a spy for the communist forces, half French and half Vietnamese. The structure of the novel is a confession written by the narrator to a mysterious commander for his captive. The narrator was forced to abandon Vietnam during the fall of Saigon to maintain his cover and continue to monitor his generals who had been working during the war. During his tenure in the United States, the narrator became a war adviser in Hollywood movies, continued to monitor the general, and had to make increasingly difficult decisions to maintain his cover and navigate his loyalty.

In this award-winning novel, the captain of a communist agent infiltrate the South Vietnamese Army, who fled to the United States with other army officials, including his superiors, generals and his family after the "Fall of Saigon". After arriving in the United States, the captain tried to balance his new life with secret activities. This task became difficult when the general began to suspect that there might be revolts of the Communist Party hidden in it. To keep himself away from suspicion, the captain accused a shrewd major of being a spy. As a result, he was

forced to assassinate him with the help of his friend Bon, and the murder began to haunt and torment him. On the advice of the general, the captain decided to act as a film consultant for the director who was making a film about the Vietnam War. The captain then went to the Philippines, where the film was shot, but it did not go as expected. His relationship with the film director was strained, and after getting into trouble in an explosion designed by the director himself, he finally returns home. After the general returned to Los Angeles, he formed a secret task force with other Vietnamese refugees in an attempt to regain control of Vietnam. However, when the captain returned, the general again forced him to kill someone. This time, it was Sonny, his former college classmate, who started writing about this secret mission. After proving his loyalty to the general, the captain was also allowed to participate in the mission. He did so against the order of his manager, and Man instructed him to stay in the United States, because performing the task might bring risks to the captain. In order to protect his best friend, the captain ignored Man's advice and went to Thailand with Bon and other members. In the end, the mission failed, and most of the gangs were killed by Communist forces. The survivor was sent to a training camp, but the captain was held in solitary confinement, where he began to write a confession: "Sympathizer." However, his confession was not enough, because the commander and political commissar still believed that he did not tell the truth. In order to force him to tell the truth, he was later exposed as the commander of human affairs. Torture of the captain was the final stage of his education. The torture included extreme sleep deprivation, which eventually allowed the captain to remember the depressed moments in his memory and answer the final riddles to end his studies. In the end, the captain and Bon were released and joined the "boat people" when they tried to return to the United States.

The Sympathizer is a response to the false statements made by Vietnamese and Vietnamese in pop culture and media. It provides another way to resolve conflicts in Southeast Asia, showing that it is possible to write articles about war and explore other plots with a focus on non-stereotypes. As shown in the following chapters, Nguyen successfully constructed a new fictional version of the Vietnam War by first using original and unique literary genres, and secondly narrating the story through the perspective of the Vietnam.

The Sympathizer is the confession of the spy. It is also a political novel, a satirical story, refugee literature and reviews of modern mass media, which are combined with discourse paragraphs, with literary references and maxims. In addition, Nguyen tried to write this novel from the perspective of the United States representing the Vietnam War. The story told by the captain is an analysis of his behavior to achieve clarity. “My hope is that the sun of truth will shine on you,” the Commandant tells him after reading his confession, one that he considers incomplete because the Captain has failed to see the truth(407). In fact, it is at his lowest—when the Captain is physically and emotionally tortured—that he is “at last, enlightened” (477), therefore understanding the ultimate truth about the revolution he had been fighting for, that “while nothing is more precious than independence and freedom, nothing is also more precious than independence and freedom!” (486). He considers the two slogans similar, but “every truth [means] at least two things” (480):

The first inspiring slogan was Ho Chi Minh’s empty suit, which he no longer wore. How could he? He was dead. The second slogan was the tricky one, the joke. It was Uncle Ho’s empty suit turned inside out, a sartorial sensation that only a man of two minds, or a man with no face, dared to wear. This odd suit suited me, for it was of a cutting-edge cut. Wearing this inside-out 19 suit, my

seams exposed in an unseemly way, I understood, at last, how our revolution had gone from being the vanguard of political change to the rearguard hoarding power. . . . Having liberated ourselves in the name of independence and freedom—I was so tired of saying these words!—we then deprived our defeated brethren of the same. Besides a man with no face, only a man of two minds could get this joke, about how a revolution fought for independence and freedom could make those things worth less than nothing. (486-487)

The captain's enlightenment on the true meaning of war is a moment that is usually missing in American stories about the Vietnam War. By introducing such a complicated character, Nguyen proves that war narratives do not require combat experience to be effective or make readers understand and feel Vietnam. The fact is that in the war, both sides are fighting for freedom and independence, unless everyone uses the method that best suits their point of view. That's what happened in Vietnam, and the American novelists of the past failed to grasp this when writing stories. War is fighting for independence and freedom, because nothing is more important than this. However, France, the United States, and northern Vietnam all waged wars to liberate Vietnam, but once they seized power, they began to rob those who had different views on the two things they claimed to protect. On the other hand, "nothing is more precious than independence and freedom" implies the emptiness of these values.

The revolution in which the captain and political commissar first participated is now meaningless. Ho Chi Minh's slogan has become a useless truth for war. This is the duality and irony of the Vietnam War. This is why only a spy, a person with two minds, can understand the duality. For this reason, the spy novels used by Nguyen to tell the "real" Vietnam War stories are more accurate and accurate than any type of novels previously used by American writers.

The narrator and protagonist of the story is a person without a name, who is only referred to as the "captain" throughout the novel. This conspiracy met him and fled Saigon with a general of the South Vietnamese Army. Knowingly, he has a secret. In the first few lines, he revealed that he was a sleeper agent, actually working for the Communist Party of Vietnam, engaged in spying work for the South Vietnamese Army and the Central Intelligence Agency. The captain's narrative is actually a confession. Readers are attracted by many stories and enter multi-level stories. These stories bring us back to the captain's childhood, youth and years of studying abroad. He is the illegitimate son of a French priest, talented, and his young Vietnamese mates have set him as an outsider from the beginning. As the so-called "hybrid", he actually has duality in his body and mind. He is a mutilated person and does not really belong anywhere. His father ignored him and didn't seem to care much about the young mother. He just continued to live a hypocritical life as a Catholic priest, keeping his family secret. This is the material of the Greek epic. Nguyen went further here, creating a protagonist that can be seen as a metaphor for Vietnam itself and its relationship with foreign conquerors.

Throughout the fiction, the Narrating protagonist does not show any heroic characteristics which can be regarded as the characteristics of the role model of the society. His characteristics are not like those of a courageous individual who risks fighting against existing evil social rules, values and norms, and makes people breathe the air of freedom. He is instead attributed as a person lower than normal human beings who runs away from the situation in order to save his own life. Being a spy agent, he is not even able to save his own nation from the destructive war, betrayed his friends, and plays the double role in against to his country. The narrator is also a sleeper agent for the Viet Cong, who reports on the activities of the refugees to his

Communist superiors. When writing about the Vietnam War, the clearest dualities are the political ones between the Communist Viet Cong and the supposed advocates of Western-style democracy in the South Vietnamese Army. More, it is the geographical and cultural dualities between the North and the South, the East and the West. The narrating protagonist is the personification of these divides. He is rejected by both the East and the West due to his failure but no fault of his own. Meanwhile, the refugee community learns to integrate into American culture without losing their native identity. These conditions require the adoption of dual sensibilities. This is how the protagonist picks such identities to escape from bad upcoming situations.

Nguyen examines how the narrating protagonist and other Vietnamese refugees establish identity, not by choosing sides, but by embracing dualism. His hero's attribute resemble that of Northrop Frye's concept of the hero of the fifth mode that is the hero of ironic mode. Nguyen has created such hero of ironic mode (anti-hero) in order to satirize the then the Americanization of the Vietnam War. The War is seen through the lens of the narrator, who is well-versed in both aspects of the Vietnamese perspective of the conflict, but he is increasingly exposed to the American idea of the war in which the Americans are the heroes in spite of the fact that they are fighting to support a government that rose from the ashes of the French Imperial regime.

In traditional realistic novels, heroes are basically brave people and are regarded as synonymous with social role models. The hero's functions are not marked by any weaknesses. They are like sacred figures, always keeping the people under surveillance and acting as everyone's savior when everyone encounters any problems and difficulties. Such heroes will never be defeated by any evil or other flaws such as Byronic heroes. Many heroes in myths and legends can be regarded as examples of

such heroes, and such heroes are hardly found in reality. In his book *Heroes and Villains*, Mike Alsford introduced some of the main characteristics of traditional heroes in traditional novels.

As we have seen, self-sacrifice –often in the face of overwhelming opposition and apparent lack of hope –are the hallmarks of the hero. . . The decision to give up one's life for another, to value another more than oneself, to place oneself between another and harm is, I believe, fundamentally heroic. (128)

The hero should have the fundamental character of self-sacrifice. He values others' life more than his own. He does not count any harm on himself in saving others' life. He does not even fall back to risk his own life for the sake of others.

Hero not only sacrifices his life to save others' lives but also has a characteristic of being omnipotent. To be heroic is to share the joy and pain, to make no demands on other. Alsford further claims:

The hero has less to do with power and ability than with attitude. . . . They share joy and pain; they sympathize and sometimes even empathize with those whom they feel responsible for. They are prepared to be a resource for the other . . . to lighten the burden of pain and anguish without any apparent benefit to the hero themselves.... True hero makes no demands on the other. . . . To be heroic may mean nothing more than this then, to stand in the face of the status quo, in the face of an easy collapse into the madness of an increasingly chaotic world and represent another way. (129-32)

Heroes are, thus, god-like human beings. They are the rescuers of common humans who have fallen in the difficulties. They are like true friends who share joy and sorrows of the people but expect nothing in return from them. They are the reformer of the society who change the evil and dogmatic types of rules and bring the new

ones.

Unlike heroes, villains are the other chief characters who are inevitable in fictions. As heroes are god-like creatures, villains are evil creatures who dream to put the common people in problems. They enjoy victimizing the common people by creating different sorts of problems themselves and putting them in front of the common people. Alsford, again in *Heroes and Villains*, clarifies:

. . . a villain has more to do with a particular attitude of mind rather than any particular power, or indeed any action. To see the world and those within it as a thing to be made use of is, in my view, the height of villainy --whether this be witnessed to in the playground, the street, the home the office or internationally. . . . The villains lack the necessary 'sense of responsibility towards the other. . . . Absence of respect for the environment and the wider animal world can, I believe, be regarded as an act of villainy because of the lack of empathy with future generations that this exhibits. (132-35)

In contrast to the heroes, villains are irresponsible to the environment and even the future generations. They are self-centered and seek to gain everything by themselves. They adopt the monstrous way to fulfill these expectations of them.

In Viet Thanh Nguyen's work *The Sympathizer*, the protagonist resembles none of the above mentioned features. His attributes are neither godly like that of conventional heroes nor monstrous like the villains as described in Mike Alsford's *Heroes and Villains*. Nguyen as a modern fiction writer has experimented with his protagonist in this fiction.

Modern fiction writers and filmmakers deliberately associate the themes of their works with the elements of the novel or film, such as titles, characters, forms, settings, tone, and various other elements. They even tried those elements in the work

to make it relevant to the theme of the work. Julie Armstrong, in her book, *Experimental Fiction: An Introduction for Readers and Writers*, gives various reasons why these experimental writers experiment with those elements in their literary works. She justifies the experimentations as follows:

There are also writers who are creating works in order to make sense of the world and their place in it, and in so doing, they produce works which depart from tradition realist fiction, a form considered to be too restricting to express some writers' thoughts and ideas. As a consequence, they create new forms, styles and genres of literary work. In addition, there are writers who consciously react against traditional realist fiction with the intention of creating work which will bring self-realization and change in people's lives, and in so doing, they too establish new forms and content. (2)

Armstrong also supports fiction writers deliberately creating their own characters and breaking the rules of realist fiction creation. However, they do have the purpose of doing so. They not only created their own new elements in the novel, but also impressed the readers, and tried their best to connect their elements with reality, so that the readers could easily believe the idea of doing so.

In order to depict the reality of heroes in modern novels, modern novelists have created their own heroes. Their heroes are not only earlier than the affirmative humans—they blend positive and negative characteristics. They are sometimes higher than normal people, and sometimes lower than normal people. But writers have some specific goals for creating such heroes.

In this modern fiction, Nguyen's protagonist is not as brave as the traditional hero. He cannot protest against the dangers and evils of his life. On the contrary, he evaded the situation and tried to get rid of the chaos situation. He did not play any role

that can be attributed to a traditional hero. In the novel, the protagonist works as a communist espionage for the revolutionary group of the North Vietnamese Communist Party. At the same time, he was also the commander of a revolutionary group in South Vietnam, facing an identity crisis due to his dual agent status, which in turn made him question his political and moral beliefs. In the novel, the narrator describes himself as a person with two thoughts. "I am simply able to see any issue from both sides," he says. He claims that his talent "possesses" him, and we in turn sympathize with him as it seems he is unable to sympathize with his enemies. Seeing both sides means being divided, and we feel for the man who has been divided most of his life. He was born in Vietnam -a divided country - raised in America, and now works as a double agent. He is also a bastard, the son of a Vietnamese woman and a priest, and we get the sense that his "weakness for sympathizing" is partly a reaction against the lack of sympathy he received as a child born out of marriage. "I credit my gentle mother with teaching me the idea that blurring the lines between us and them can be a worthy behavior,"(38) he says. "After all, if she had not blurred the lines between maid and priest, or allowed them to be blurred, I would not exist."(39) We admire the narrator for his radical sympathy, but it is true, as the narrator says, that the "talent that possesses you — that is a hazard." The same trait that opens the door to unexpected friendships and romances also tears him apart and inevitably leads to devastating betrayal.

In the course of time, the concept of hero has changed from Greek to contemporary society. In the Greek age, morality was central to heroism while virtues were considered heroic qualities. However, these concepts no more support coming up to the middle ages when religious homage and respect toward Gods were taken as heroic qualities. Similarly, in the Renaissance period, humanism and human centre

were respected as heroic concepts. However, in modern world, heroic concept of hero has been changed. Anne Morrow Lindbergh explains:

The balanced judgment of the historian is particularly valuable today when we are overwhelmed by an abundance of public media constantly creating images of public figures. In our present-day culture the image of a hero is sometimes blown up overnight and often torn down a few months later. The historian, as I see it, attempts to cut through the myth of legend, propaganda, and gossip. He tries to test the image of the public man and find out, if possible what is false and what is true, or what is probable what is improbable, and what is relevant to the history of the mankind (162).

The hero nowadays is different from the heroes in myths. Those powerful, omnipotent and cogent heroes are only found in myths. The real hero in modern time should be picked from the general public who does not bear only the positive attributes as heroes in the myths but also characterizes with some probable negative attributes as fear, cowardice and many others features as such. Modern heroes bear such features because those characteristics are inevitable in every human in this modern time.

The narrative protagonist is ironic in his fiction. Born to a Vietnamese mother and a French father, the narrator does not feel that he truly belongs in Vietnam. Additionally, his entire life consists of lying about his true alliances as a spy. " I am a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces. Perhaps not surprisingly, I am also a man of two minds(1). However, he is the one Vietnamese person hired by a big Hollywood movie director to help him portray Vietnamese people more authentically in his Vietnam War film. Likewise, the one person the General trusts to find and assassinate the communist spy among their ranks in America is the narrator. Still, the narrator is the spy he is looking for all along. In soliciting the narrator to kill

alleged spies, he is truly encouraging a communist spy to kill his own loyal men. Before I only wanted to change the world. I still want that, but it was ironic how I never wanted to change myself. Yet that's where revolutions start! And it's the only way revolutions can continue, if we keep looking inward, looking at how others might see us. That's what happened when I met Sofia. I saw myself the way she saw me. Before I only wanted to change the world. I still want that, but it was ironic how I never wanted to change myself. Yet that's where revolutions start! And it's the only way revolutions can continue, if we keep looking inward, looking at how others might see us (30).

The irony itself is the meaning of the fruitlessness of the war in Nguyen's fiction. The communist revolutionaries fight tirelessly to free their people from their oppressors, but the novel ends with them oppressing Vietnamese society and many citizens locked in prisons or doing forced labor. The army generals who flee Vietnam with the narrator are willing to abandon their own people for their families' safety and better lives in the United States. After a few years in the United States, though, they are as miserable with their lives as immigrants that they are willing to sacrifice their lives to return to Vietnam and fight for their people once the battle has already been lost.

A critique Northrop Frye, in *Anatomy of Criticism*, classifies heroes in five different modes and places such hero in the fifth mode as a hero in ironical mode. This hero is inferior to ordinary men in power and intelligence. In his model, the fictional modes are determined by the hero's specific roles and conditions in the fictional world, a manifestation of the real world. He explains the hero in ironical mode as:

If inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves, so that we have the sense of

looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity, the hero belongs to the ironic mode. This is still true when the reader feels that he is or might be in the same situation, as the situation is being judged by the norms of a greater freedom (34).

Hero who is presented generally inferior in power or intelligent to normal human beings is placed in the ironic mode by Frye. Such hero is looked down on a scene if bondage, frustration and absurdity. Nguyen's fiction *The Sympathizer* has both the elements and described above: the extreme situation of scrutiny where the freedom of normal human beings enjoying reading books or keeping them home is censored by the fire-station and the less powerful hero both in physical, ability and mental intelligence.

Frye further elucidates the writers' motive of creating the hero of ironic mode in their fiction. In doing so, he contrasts the sophisticated to naive irony. Nguyen's irony can be taken as naive irony he putting forth through his unnamed hero.

Sophisticated and naïve irony can be differentiated as follows:

The ironic fiction-writer ... deprecates himself and . . . pretends to know nothing, even that he is ironic. . . .pity and fear are not raised in ironic art: they are reflected to the reader from the art. . . . Irony, as a mode, is born from the low mimetic; it takes life exactly as it finds it. . . . irony is naturally a sophisticated and the chief difference between sophisticated and naïve irony is that the nave ironist calls attention to the fact that he is being ironic, whereas sophisticated irony merely states, and lets the reader add the ironic tone himself (40-41)

In this way, it can be said that Nguyen, in *The Sympathizer*, has created the Protagonist to put naive irony by creating the real world in fiction of that time. The

representation of Vietnam War through American lens is shown in an extreme form in the fiction. Satirizing the society through the modern hero is the practice of modern fiction writers. An anti-hero is the form of such modern hero created by the modern writers.

The critique Joseph Campbell in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* explores the concept of the monomythical "hero's quest" and hero archetypes. He illustrates several uniting themes of hero stories that hold similar ideas of what a hero represents despite vastly different cultures and beliefs. In his book, Campbell identified the broadly recurring pattern of superhuman or otherwise extraordinary exploits of individuals known as the hero archetype and described his theory of the 'monomyth' - the cross-cultural story formula for a hero's journey.

He explains that the monomyth or Hero's Journey consists of three separate stages; Departure, Initiation, and Return. Within these stages there are several archetypes that the hero may follow. He explains monomyths as: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (12). Campbell's hero is typically a character that has either had something taken from them or lacks something. They go out in search of that which is missing and achieve it, along with self-discovery or enlightenment of some variety. The hero archetype and subsequent quest can be found throughout history and across a multitude of mediums: religion, literature, popular culture, films, art, etc. Viet Thanh Nguyen took this tradition that transcends history and inverted it. Writing as a confession, the novel starts from the end that the narrating protagonist has imprisoned at a detention camp in North Vietnam, as "a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces". Thus, by the

starting of the novel, the negated technique of conventional hero came forth in thenovel.

Joseph Campbell's archetypal hero ventures out in search of knowledge and glory, returning home victorious, master of two worlds, wiser and uplifting to those he encounters. By inverting of this, Nguyen's hero goes out in search of personal gain and uncovering of his identity, no help to himself, or others. In the novel, both heroic and anti-heroic quests can be broken up into three phases: departure, initiation, and return. Within these phases the novel also goes through the same stages; call to adventure, entrance into the unknown world, the abyss, punishment, and return. These lines further explain the anti heroic quests of Campbell's phases of departure, initiation and return.

Outside the basilica, we said good-bye, our real farewell,... Giving me a look of great sympathy, he said, My friend, I'm a subversive, not a seer. The timetable for your return will depend on what your General plans.., I could not say what his plans were besides escaping the country. I only assumed that he had more in mind than the futile words emblazoned on the banners flanking the boulevard leading to the presidential palace, which a dissident pilot had strafed earlier in the month. NO LAND TO THE COMMUNISTS! NO COMMUNISTS IN THE SOUTH! COALITION GOVERNMENT! NO NEGOTIATION! (32)

Aforementioned lines clearly show the condition of uncertainty of their quests of identity, plans, purpose and future of their journey. The mere quantity of trust, belief and faith amongst the characters cannot be found along with these lines. The meaningless departure of the protagonist has no ventures of glory and pride in his journey. Most of the characters also did the same throughout the novel: hero becomes

anti-hero, and other minor characters became betrayal at the end. The General continues to fight against the Communists, ordering the killings of anyone suspected of working with the Viet Cong, including the Carpulant Major and Sonny. On the one hand he is a dedicated person of protagonist who works against Viet-cong but the General actually works for Viet-cong on the other side. As known as "blood brother" of the narrator, Man lastly imprisoned the narrator in the detention camp in North Vietnam. These different roles help move the narrative along and appear throughout the different phases and stages in the anti-hero's quest.

Nguyen weaves a complicated and layered story of a character who faces the catastrophic dread of being found out on a daily basis, who also desperately wants to find his own identity and place himself within a familiar and familial context. He identifies as a double agent, but he also identifies as "illegitimate, bastard, Eurasian, Amerasian, love child, natural child"(2).

The captain is an incredibly complex character who also belongs nowhere. He is forever doomed to be between two worlds. He is a cipher, a paradox. In this way, the protagonist serves as a deep interrogation of the self, of politics, culture, friendship, language, and love. It is told through a prism, which allows the narrative to become both an encouragement and reflections of these subjects. Its greatest achievement is that it aims to cross-examine these concepts through the lens of the captain's defining experiences. He goes about his day creating allegiances on both sides, plotting assassinations, befriending enemies, and making secret enemies of friends. All the while his own fragile sense of identity is crumbling. The following lines further elucidate the role of identity of the narrating protagonist:

Easy for him to say when his father and mother got along reasonably well,
while his siblings looked the other way when it came to his revolutionary

sympathies. This was common enough when many a family was divided against itself, some fighting for the north and some for the south, some fighting for communism and some for nationalism. Still, no matter how divided, all saw themselves as patriots fighting for a country to which they belonged. When I reminded him that I did not belong here, he said, You don't belong in America, either. Perhaps, I said. But I wasn't born there. I was born here.(32)

The protagonist is generally admired for his bravery, strength, charm, ingenuity and many more while an anti-hero is typically clumsy, unsolicited, and unskilled and has both good and bad qualities. The origin of this literary device is marked in 1714, but there have been literary figures who believe that the concept of an anti-hero existed well before that. Recently the usage of anti-hero in films and fictions has increased and became bolder than ever. This practice is admired by the audience and readers which encourages the writers and film makers to continue it in their works.

Skillfully used anti-hero can serve a great purpose. And anti-hero brings the spice and flavor to a script that an ordinary hero-villain cannot. The more secular approach to the idea of using anti-hero shows that it has much more potential as compared to the conventional style. It can be used to represent many things at the same time such as social flaws, human frailties and political culture. An anti-hero is usually given the most prominent role after the protagonist and is represented as an amalgamation of both good and evil. Instead of having two different people to represent two extremes, an anti-hero combines both into one person and thus shows the real human nature.

Moreover, in modern society when we are presented with a character that is overly righteous and upright, we find it too good to be true. The social turmoil that

the entire world as a community has been facing recently has disposed us to be skeptical of almost everything. The greatness that a conventional antagonist shows is something we do not witness in society, which is why we find it far from reality. Suffering and sorrow are a part of human life. So, we relate better to a character that has suffered through life and has both good and bad sides than a character that is only seen doing good.

Hjalmar Hjørth Boyesen, a critique, mentions that the fiction writers are able to trace the human qualities in the fiction along with the span of time. No human being can be without flaws and such human, with both types of characters, is traced in the works of fiction by the modern writers. He insists:

If heroes of fiction were endowed with the power of sensation, they would, no doubt, be oppressed with a similar consciousness of pre-existence. . . .

Environments may change, and are continually changing; and a certain modification in the hero's external guise and speech and sentiment may be the result of what we call "modern improvement." . . . The fundamental traits of human nature, transmitted by inheritance from generation to generation, seem capable of but a limited amount of variation, and it would seem as if the novelists had already reached the limit (694).

The above extract focuses that the fiction writers with the change in the human traits pertaining to time are also able to change the limitation of the features of their characters in their works. With the change in environment due to the advancement brought up by the development of science and technology, the human' thought, living style, guise, speech and sentiment have changed. And so are the characters in the fictions created by the modern writers.

However, the novel *The Sympathizer*, not only talked about Vietnam but about

more than just that tragedy, or it talks about from a different perspective. Viet Thanh Nguyen has shown us a perspective of the war in Vietnam that had barely received any visibility until now, especially in American literature. His use of the spy genre, in combination with an ensemble of Vietnamese voices, is what was needed to de-Americanize the portrayal of the war in literature and film. By using the modern heroic concept, Nguyen is successful in his mission. *The Sympathizer* proves that the narrative surrounding the war in America was monotonous, repetitive and inadequate. Contemporary American authors did not know how to imagine the war as more than what had been written in the past. Therefore, they never dared to bring around the subject and introduce different points of view. Nguyen, however, revived the conflict, converted the war into a current subject in literature. More importantly, he reclaimed the war in Viet Nam as a Vietnamese tragedy that should be written by an author of Vietnamese descent for a global audience. All in all, what Nguyen has achieved with *The Sympathizer* is to place Vietnamese people back at the center of their own history.

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