



# The Last Rise and Fall Shown to us by the Man Who Chose “Swollen Foot”: The Film *The Whale*

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The film *The Whale* goes beyond just depicting one aspect of the life of a morbidly obese man. As the audience watches Charlie, the main character who helplessly chose to live a morbidly obese life, we are compelled to reflect on what it means for ourselves to rise from the ground as we live in a gravitational field. Ultimately, this film is in line with director Darren Arnofsky's previous masterpiece, *Black Swan*. While the Oedipus complex runs through both films, this film goes one step further than *Black Swan* to face head-on the theme of “swollen foot,” which is the original meaning of Oedipus. Through this move, we realize the essence of the Oedipus complex—something more fundamental than castration anxiety—something that we have been missing.

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I could not have possibly imagined the final scene and ending credits in *The Whale* (2022) (Fig. 1). Charlie, in a towering double-leg stance, then sinking into the water—perhaps the ocean. Only then does it become somewhat clear why he considers the novel *Moby Dick* to be such a masterpiece. Standing up, leaping, rising, descending. This film, although more profound, is in line with *Black Swan* (2010), another masterpiece from the same director (Darren Arnofsky).

Let us think about the preconceived notions we easily form about morbidly obese people—these are people who cannot take care of themselves properly, yielding to the temptation of binge eating as a result of their inability to overcome emotional pain and life stress, no matter what the reasons may be. Consequently, we have largely shunned various works of art that feature such people as the protagonist. Even the basic feelings of compassion that Dan, the pizza delivery man in the film, has for Charlie for a considerable period of time “collapse” when he sees Charlie in person, running away in fear of touching the monster. The lamentation I felt and the bitterness that gradually spread throughout my mouth after that short scene still lingers vividly.

After subconsciously realizing that Charlie will not live long, people around him take diverse actions. Liz, a nurse who had been a long-time coworker and somewhat of a sis-

ter-in-law to Charlie, steadfastly cares for Charlie with unwavering devotion. The missionary Thomas approaches Charlie, thinking that spreading the word of God to Charlie is his mission. Through his actions, however, he hopes to regain acceptance in the sectarian community that once cast him out. However, what allows Thomas to return to his sectarian community is the secret recording of Thomas' confession that Charlie's daughter Ellie, whom Charlie had missed so dearly, sends to Thomas' parents.

In addition, the belligerent, wild, and troubling pranks of Ellie, who suddenly shows up in response to Charlie's invitation, can make the audience uncomfortable at times. However, we need to rethink her actions. Ellie intentionally acts in such a way at times and such actions paradoxically offer a solution to the problem that the major character in the film has to resolve.

If the film is watched without careful attention, it may seem as though Charlie gives Ellie the mission to write an essay. However, looking deeper, it is clear that the one who ultimately gives the mission is Ellie, not Charlie. Ellie orders Charlie to “stand up and walk” toward her on his own without a walker.

In any storytelling, some characters play certain roles expected by the audience or reader. A character who shows traits of both good and evil may appear, someone intangible whose actions one can never predict. In this film, Ellie plays this role. Ellie reminded me of “a trickster,” a character in an-

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Fig. 1. Poster of the film *The Whale* (source: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt13833688/>).

cient mythology and Indian folklore. Furthermore, she is the trickster invited by Charlie! Perhaps Ellie intuitively realizes the meaning of the sudden invitation sent by Charlie, who had abandoned her, and subconsciously understands the mission that she is given. Ultimately, the person who has to write the essay on “the honest opinion” is not Ellie but Charlie, who is nearing the end of his life. Thus, Ellie faithfully performs her role as the trickster. She must be seen from this perspective to understand her polar opposite behaviors and extreme shifts in her emotions. Finally, Charlie can “stand up alone” at the end of his essay, his life.

Standing on one’s own two feet and legs! This is the fate of humans, animals who walk almost perfectly upright in a gravitational field. How many cognitive concepts and spatial metaphors does life in this gravitational field offer to humans as gifts? High and low, heaven and earth, ascending and descending, rising up with good feelings and falling down with bad feelings, brightness on top and darkness at the bottom... As the scene in which Charlie “stands up on his own” became brightly lit, I was summoning *Black Swan* in my mind, another masterpiece from the same director.

The most important premise in *Black Swan* is “ballet,” which

is a form of dance that basically requires jumping up after striking the ground. In other words, the fate of “rising” exists in ballet. A jump higher and more perfect than the previous jump is very important in ballet. Thus, one of the most important scenes in *Black Swan* is when the main character Nina bends and breaks her two legs as she becomes micro-psychotic or falls into a serious dissociative phenomenon. At the end of the film, Nina finally achieves her desire for “rising,” but she collapses mentally.

Ultimately, the Oedipus complex runs through the two films. However, *Black Swan* examines the Oedipus complex through Nina’s psychopathological experience of broken legs, where the body rises but the mind collapses. On the other hand, *The Whale* represents a deeper exploration of the concept of “mytheme” by Lévi-Strauss [1] inherent in the Oedipus complex. In the word Oedipus, “oedi” means swollen, and “pus” means foot. Therefore, Oedipus has the symbolic fate of having to live with swollen feet on the land where he was born and raised.

Charlie “embodies” this symbolic fate with his own body. He knew Christian ethics all too well and was well aware of the social norms that he should abide by as a man who has a family. However, he crossed the line of taboo by choosing the love of someone of the same sex. The subsequent death of his lover caused him to live a life of morbid obesity, but the fact of the matter is that he had substituted his body for a “swollen foot.” Let us not focus only on his legs and feet, physically or anatomically. His entire body became a swollen foot.

When he began to feel that he was nearing the end of his life, he called on his daughter. He may have had an intuition that his daughter may be the trickster who would give him a mission, like the Sphinx giving a riddle. In other words, his end was more than a castration of his swollen foot. Only someone who has truly embodied swollen foot in his/her own body may qualify to finish the essay through a single rise and leap! Moreover, he earns the right to speak to us, the audience. “Do you all know that you are living with a swollen foot?”. Only then, Charlie can end his fate of a swollen foot and become a real whale, instead of a swollen foot, falling into the ocean. I could never forget the sound of a whale in the ending credit scenes.

We all live with a “swollen foot” as our fate, when we are dreaming of rising, leaping, or barely standing. The realization of such a fate will come at a different time for each of us. However, such a realization will compel us to take a deeper look into our own lives.

#### Availability of Data and Material

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the study.

### Conflicts of Interest

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