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An Analysis of the American-Style Optimism Based on *Forrest Gump*

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Abstract:

American-style optimism is the product when groups of puritans took the Mayflower to come to America. This spirit not only have an important influence to puritans who suffered from struggles but have a long and profound effect on American society. Speaking of American-style optimism, there are many factors such as history, religion, culture and so on. With the development society and the changes of times, the spirit plays a potential role in education, social welfare and interests of women and children. It encourages individuals from generation to generation to move forward towards a positive direction. The blockbuster *Forrest Gump* affects many people in terms of Civil Rights Movement, Vietnam War and feminism in the United States. The hero Forrest Gump shows his encouragement and never gives up when he is faced with numerous problems. The young generation will be encountered many obstacles when they pursue their dreams. If there is no optimism, there is no a promising future. They inherit this optimistic spirit to build their characteristics and become a responsible young person.

Key words: *Forrest Gump*; American-style optimism; American dreams; rights

I. *Forrest Gump*: An Overview

1.1 Introduction of the *Forrest Gump*

As one of the greatest and most meaningful movies, *Forrest Gump* is the modern American parable that integrates with American history, legend, future and dreams and so on. On one hand, it depicts that the hero, Forrest Gump, whose IQ is merely 75 and body is paralyzed in his childhood, becomes an excellent young man, overcoming his limits and having various and colorful experiences such as being a football athlete, a king of catching shrimp and a Vietnam War hero, to name but a few. However, he suffers a lot in his childhood and adulthood. For example, his classmates laugh at him when he is young and he is misunderstood when he is growing up. On the other hand, *Forrest Gump* also depicts other figures and scenes such as Gump's mother who loves her son all the time, Jenny who gives Gump encouragement and Captain Tyler who is saved by Gump. In addition, while depicting Forrest Gump's whole life, the movie also shows a number of historical events and iconic figures from 1950 to 1980. The film has not only displayed the ups and downs of modern American history, but also reflected the post-war society and witnessed enormous changes in the United States. The film refers to many events such as Vietnam War, Civil Rights Movements, the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the United States, and so forth. At the same time, it also vividly reflects the transformation of American society which includes the anti-war movement, sexual liberty, anti-culture movement, the Women's Movement and the feminist movement, etc. To be honest, in spite of the events or the changes of society, the traditional values, people's spiritual momentum and American dream that are rooted in the people's hearts remain constant. Their pursuit and passion for life and their persistence when faced with difficulties are the best testimony to the American-style optimism.

All in all, *Forrest Gump*, as the classic movie of the combination of American cultures and values in the late 20th century, presents Gump's personal experiences and American events. This not only enables the audience to grasp the understanding of American culture from a totally new prospective, but inspires them to strive for a better life.

1.2 Spirit of Times Reflected in the *Forrest Gump*

“The movie *Forrest Gump* has always been the topic of discussion and research, mainly on the American dreams typically represented by the character and the spirit of the United States.”(Xiang, 2014:24) Actually, there are a number of spirits of the times in the *Forrest Gump*, such as courage, persistence, honesty and so on. But the most outstanding spirit in the movie is American-style optimism. The characters in the movie are like living souls representing the spirit and they are the best expression of the American-style optimism. Apart from Forrest Gump, there are four main characters in the film: Gump’s mother, Captain Tyler, Jenny and Bubba. In the beginning, Forrest Gump said, “being an idiot is no box of chocolates.”(Groom, 1986: IX) Although people laugh, lose patience and treat him shabby, his mom who is a devoted and persistent woman always loves him. She has known that her son is mentally handicapped, but she also tells him, “you are no difference than anybody else.” As a responsible mother, she would definitely not desert her son and she does not let Gump who has mental retardation go to special school. Although she is abandoned by her husband and she has reasons to leave her son, but she did not. What she says and what she does have demonstrated the quality of a great mother who shows her own American-style optimism that has been passed down from generation to generation. When Gump is still a kid, she has a best friend whose name is Jenny. However, as Jenny grows up, she becomes a rebellious youth who seeks for a so-called freedom. She drops out of school in order to pose nude and participates in the feminist movement and the sexual revolution as well as the campaign against racial discrimination. Unfortunately, Jenny is messed up with drugs. However, when she sees Forrest Gump keeping running on the television, she is touched and encouraged, and decides to get rid of these bad habits and to be a good woman. Then she makes it and finds a sense of happiness which is a form of optimism. At the wedding of Forrest Gump and Jenny, another person shows up. That is Captain Tyler. He is a wise and confident hero before the Vietnam War while he becomes a dispirited and cynical person after the Vietnam War, especially when he is paralyzed. It is Forrest Gump who appears in his life and sets an optimistic and prime example for him. Finally, Captain returns to a promising life and becomes a businessman instead of a drunkard. Both Jenny and Captain who suffer from something unsatisfactory are deeply influenced by Forrest Gump who is an optimistic and positive person and often shows positive power. This generation comes up against difficulties in life and changes their life through hard and tough struggle. It can be seen that American individuals represent the spirit of the nation---that is American-style optimism.

II. American-Style Optimism as a Constituent of Gump’s Personality

2.1 Origin of the American-Style Optimism

American people’s optimism stems from the present life struggle and the desire for a better future. That is to say, those who have suffered a lot still believe that they will lead a better life no matter how hard life is and they can gain whatever they want. Religious words frequently appear in *Forrest Gump* such as God and Jesus. When Gump is a kid, his mother always takes him to go to church to be in pray. Besides, Gump and Captain go to the church everyday, sing carols and pray to God for an end to their failure after they fail to catch shrimps. Fortunately, they made it. Gump and Captain both become billionaires. It can be seen that if American people do not have a religion, they will not possess a sense of belonging or a sense of happiness in the fiercely competitive society. The most important thing is that they have no desire to pursue a better and optimistic life if they do not have a religion. That’s to say, religion assumes a great priority in the origin of the American-style optimism. The Puritans, the majority among the earlier immigrants, are optimistic and passionate. They leave their motherland not just because they want to avoid the national political and religious persecution and pursue the quality life but because they desire to build “the City upon the Hill” in America. Although this sort of optimism can not ease their pains and sufferings at all, the spirit which is involved in the religion is their moral support. And then, the optimism is passed down by groups of puritans and goes from strength to strength. Moreover, it is represented by Calvinism. There is a close relationship between God’s mercy and people’s religion in terms of Calvinism. Although sinful people may be sentenced by God to go to hell, they are also provided with many choices to atone for a crime. If those people can come to realize their own defects and flaws and correct their mistakes, they can gain God’s mercy and turn to become one of the subjects of the heaven. Those religious people will have promising prospects and will possess a complete and eternal godsend. When puritans put Calvinism into practice, their optimistic feelings become clearer.

They believe that America is the new land as a new heaven and new Earth through God's promise. "If they make some mistakes or go through a lot during the process, they still regard this journey as a sacred and inviolable mission" (Bi, 2011:6). The holy sense of calling helps puritans get through numerous difficulties, live through cold and impoverished winters, and evade American Indian's attacks rather than stop their steps to move forward. Thus, it can be explained by Gump and Captain Tyler who have a religious tend to be optimistic in their life.

2.2 Optimism Displayed by Forrest Gump

America from 1960 to 1990 has witnessed twists and turns in many aspects. But the hero, Forrest Gump has gained numerous achievements in the tough social contexts. For example, he is enrolled by the college, becomes a sport star and is received by the President. People tend to see others' success when they have acquaintance with each other, while they are likely to neglect what a successful one has suffered. However, Gump is considered as an idiot when he is a kid and he does go through a lot. His IQ is 75, which means he has to go to a special school instead of normal schools like other kids. And his legs are paralyzed so that he has to wear leg orthosis to correct his legs, thus he has been laughed at by his classmates and friends. The research reveals that the growing environment in kids' childhood is paramount to their adult life. In his condition, he could most probably have become a coward and remain weak, afraid of doing anything that he wants to do, but he did not. Nevertheless, when he grows up, he not only gains achievements which are admired by others, but becomes a tough and strong man with all excellent characteristics and a kind heart. How does he make it? Well, it's an inheritance from his mother who tells him that everyone is equal and everyone has the right to pursue his dreams and goals but he has to remember one thing, that is to be optimistic and do not ever give up. This personality has been passed down from generation to generation in American history.

When Gump becomes an adult, he follows his heart to keep running, helps paralyzed Captain suffering from post-war life out of his shadow, and gives his own shrimp company to Bubba's family and so on. As the representative of American mainstream consciousness, Forrest Gump reflects the struggling spirit and the optimistic essence when Americans begin to pursue their American dreams. Generally, what Gump has achieved in adversity is the fulfillment of American Dream, one of distinguished features is American-style optimism.

From 1950 to 1980, the United States was experiencing turbulence both in social conditions and people's thoughts. The individual and social values were falling down at that time. However, Forrest Gump who is mentally retarded shows his American-style optimism that shines a light on the future direction in the United States and all over the world. With the changes of times, people may not be simpler and more innocent than those who live in Gump's time. But Forrest Gump's spirit deeply exists in people's hearts and affects the younger generation.

III. American-Style Optimism in Progress

3.1 Black's Achievements in the *Forrest Gump*

Forrest Gump reveals the racial culture in American society. Historical factors in the United States lead to the features of an immigrant country. There are various ethnic groups and races with different colors from diversified regions across the world, and racial discrimination ensues. In the film, the hero, Forrest Gump was born in Alabama, a state in the southeast of America, which was the most conflicting one in terms of racial clash in the American south and is the birthplace of Martin Luther King. Moreover, as the movie depicts that Gump's best friend and partner in the Vietnam War is a black man, Bubba looks fierce but has a kind heart. Bubba's whole family has been catching shrimp and cooking shrimp for white family from generation to generation. Apparently, there exist racial differences and economic disparities between the white and the black. Black people were socially and economically inferior to the white people. It is not fair or equal and it is not the true American democracy. When an unfair case comes into being, someone will stand out to champion people's rights and freedom. Thus, Martin Luther King comes out and fights against the justice.

There is no doubt that the road of the Civil Rights Movements is full of ups and downs, but a wide range of people who are fighting for their own rights and freedom remain firm in their convictions and optimistic about their prospective.

It is well known that one of the most familiar cases is Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955. "At that time, a black schoolgirl in Montgomery ignored a white man when she refused to give up her bus seat to him because the girl thought that black people were equal as the white people, but later, she was arrested by the police." (Clarke, 2002:06) The black chose to defend their own rights and dignity. At the point, Martin Luther King played an utmost role in this event and delivered a distinguished speech to encourage black people all around America to fight for their own rights. Although that current situation was extremely tense, he never thought that he would give up. However, he chose to fight until justice wins. Well, the reasons why they were still faithful and optimistic are that they inherited the spirit of optimism that has been passed down by their American ancestors, and the pursuit of glorious future that they have desired for a long time. Those black who are brave and optimistic know that there will be life about to start when tomorrow comes. Thus, they have taken a huge step, which means that they won in the case of Montgomery Bus Boycott. The black people finally won the same right as the white people when taking a bus. Although there is a long battle to fight, lots of white people choose to support their black peers and consider them as their compatriots. For Forrest Gump, although Gump knows that numerous white peers look down on black people, he still considers Bubba as his best friend and participates in black community activities. What he has said and done reveals his equal and friendly attitude. This shows that there is an alleviation of relationship between Black and white people and that they can get along with each other harmoniously. That indicates that the future of ethnic groups in the United States is optimistic and promising.

So far, the Civil Rights Movement has witnessed huge progress when Barack Obama was elected to be the 44th American President, the first and the only African American president. His election has roused people's reflection on the Civil Rights Movement. From the footage about Bubba in the film to the election of Barack Obama, the African Americans in history have achieved huge achievements because of the whole nations' struggle and the optimistic spirit.

3.2 The New Life of Veterans in the *Forrest Gump*

In the film, Forrest Gump does not have many friends. Apart from Bubba, another one is Captain Tyler who is encouraged and influenced by Gump. The movie depicts an essential event, the Vietnam War which lasted from 1955 to 1975. The war proves to be an enormous pain and causes numerous complicated social issues in America, including the anti-war movement, the problems of returning veterans, national trauma and so forth. During the war, Forrest Gump joins the army and picks up acquaintance with his Captain Tyler whose legs are amputated because of the war. Actually, at that moment, lots of people, including servicemen, family members, and businessmen suffer from the influences of the war, like trauma, economic recession, crime and violence. Take Captain Tyler as an example, his ancestors all died in battles of the Independence War, the First World War and the Second World War. For him, dying in a battle and becoming a hero is his biggest dream and his honor. In the film, Captain treasures his brave followers and shows his tribute to them. All soldiers believe that they were born for a war and are accountable for fighting for peace and justice. Though the American servicemen are defeated, Captain thought his existence is valuable. His legs are seriously wounded in a bombardment and it is Gump who saves his life. However, he wants to die in a battle field. It is bitterer for a military personnel to live than to die. After returning to the United States, he both goes through physical wounds and mental shock imposed by his paralysis. And then he is depressed and anxious because he does not gain justice and equal treatment. He gives vent to his rage and dissatisfaction in various ways. For example, Tyler abuses the passing vehicles furiously. Gradually, he is addicted to alcohol and sexual pleasure just like many veterans to release his pent-up emotions. However, Forrest Gump, with American-style optimism and passion, shows him a way filled with hope and light which helps him regain confidence and pulls himself together. Thus, under the influence of Forrest Gump, especially his spirit of hard working, Captain's consciousness is aroused. He starts to join the group catching shrimp with Gump. It is the great step for him after he goes through the grave depression. However, the shrimp catching undergoes a wide range of twists and turns. They fail due to bad weather and human damage. But Captain and Gump do not give up the business.

They go to church to pray everyday. During the Vietnam War, Captain loses faith in God because of the death of his partners and the loss of his legs. He does not pray for God even if he stands in front of the God. However, he restarts his confidence to life and business, which is shown through the changes of look in his eyes and his thought. And then their business becomes successful and he becomes a billionaire and gets his true love in the end. All in all, he lives a better life after the end of the Vietnam War with the touching of American-style optimism.

In other aspects, trauma left on the hearts of the American veterans like Captain Tyler stands out. During the war, soldiers fight for their country and their faith, and they are likely to hurt the local people and do harm to the children's lives unconsciously. When they come back to their motherland, those veterans may encounter indifferent treatment because they are considered as the killers of children, women and seniors by pacifists, because they are considered as the murderers employed by the government involved in the immoral war, and because they are considered as the losers rebuked by other veterans who won former battles. Thus, many of them are confused, guilty and felt remorseful. How do they go through these tough days to carry on their new life? The American-style optimism plays a vital role in helping them restore confidence in life. Just like the way in which Gump helps Captain, the American government and many organizations launch policies to help them adopt new life after their returning to the hometown. It indicates that those people are not alone and millions of fellow citizens will be with them. Their hearts are full of optimistic feelings. They are willing to believe that everything will be gone as long as they love the nation and stand together and work together although the adaptive process is painful.

3.3 The Promotion of Women's Power

In terms of women's role in the film, *Forrest Gump* depicts two major females, Gump's mother and Gump's girlfriend Jenny. As the paper has mentioned above, *Forrest Gump* not only makes great achievements, but also helps his friends like Bubba and Captain Tyler lead a promising life. To be honest, what he has done and said originates from his great mother. Mrs. Gump's personality has exerted great influence on Gump's character. It even might be said that the excellent spiritual heritage between mother and son makes Gump a miracle. Besides, the film also directly quotes pet phrase like "my mom often says....." to indicate Ms Gump's impact on Gump. On one hand, Gump's mother plays an important role in Gump's whole life. Ms. Gump who takes good care of him and deeply loves him gives him huge support and encouragement. She teaches his son to face life positively and courageously instead of feeling different from other normal people. Her love and persistence enable Gump to feel the warmth of family. At the same time, it is necessary to mention the power of women reflected on Gump's mother. In the movie, the headmaster advises Gump to go to a special school while his mother insists on her son going to public school like other kids. Gump's mother fights against the headmaster and shows her strength in the male-dominant society. In addition, Ms. Gump's attitude towards death also reveals a kind of American-style optimism. It is seen that the demonstration of female's greatness and courage. When she tells Gump she's dying, she shows that she optimistically accepts the end of life. Her attitude enables Gump not to be afraid of anything, even the permanent departure. As a mother, Ms. Gump leaves valuable assets and optimistic spirit to her son. On the other hand, unlike Ms. Gump, Gump's girlfriend, Jenny, who desires to seek for the freedom of love, is rebellious and degenerates in life. She is the representative of tragedy. And what she has done reflects a phenomenon that women hope to get rid of the limitations imposed on them by traditional morality. For Jenny, she dares to, at that time, fight against the injustice and inequality, and her consciousness in pursuit of equal rights gains day by day, but she adopts unorthodox measures. By contrast, women living in the 18th or 19th century were limited by the male and the patriarchal society. For example, they must clean the house, prepare the dinner, and take care of kids while their husbands do nothing at home. Besides, women were also subordinated and oppressed by male and male-dominant perceptions. Definitely speaking, Ms. Gump and Jenny have displayed a huge power to push the social development and to encourage female to pursue their freedom and life in their own way during *Forrest Gump's* time.

And now, since Hilary Clinton participated in the presidential elections in 2017, the power of women is on the rise. When she decided to run for presidency, she had taken a huge step in women's achievements and showed her great courage to the citizens in the world. Although she fails, her actions and words encourage the young female generation. Females have the rights and ability to run for the next presidency and hold any senior position in top 500 companies in the world.

In other words, women are all equal in rights and dignity and freedom of worship. What she says and what she does encourage women to be optimistic to a future without the limitations of male or low-paid employment. From Ms. Gump and Jenny to Hilary Clinton, there is a promotion of women's power which is a progress and means an optimistic and promising future for women.

IV. The Influence of American-Style Optimism in the *Forrest Gump*

4.1 The Influence on the American People

As the paper has mentioned above, American-style optimism offers American people hope and strength, which makes them form a national spirit of taking risks, overcoming limits and building up confidence. However, it not just focuses on spiritual power and a sense of happiness but also on bringing a better life to American citizens. For instance, when *Forrest Gump* is a kid, he takes a school bus to the primary school, which means they receive good treatment. In 1960, during the time of *Forrest Gump*, although American children come from impoverished family, they can also be accessible to education just like Gump because the administration launched welfare policy. When *Forrest Gump* goes to college, he is supported by the Grand-in-Aid program which aims at paying the educational fees for impoverished college students. Decades later, it is the time for Gump's son to go to school, the school bus is upgraded and facilities are improved. Thus, from the prospective of material circumstances, the Americans benefit from the American-style optimism which has transformed into the real assistance offered by the government to its people. This kind of spiritual values help many fellow citizens stand together as a huge family and deal with common problems, and enable them to always believe that the nation are unified in making their life better.

4.2 The Future of American-Style Optimism

As a matter of fact, *Forrest Gump* not only reflects American mainstream culture and values, but demonstrates a core spirit --- the American style optimism. The American people generally believe that the traditional mainstream culture in their country is the American-style optimism which is closely related to people's struggling spirit and fortitude. In the film, there are a wide range of heart-broken events that occur in history, such as the president's assassination which causes panic to the society and the Vietnam War which makes many American citizens lose their beloved one as well as the rise of counterculture that triggers depression and anxiety. Obviously, no matter what difficulties and challenges it has confronted or will confront, Americans will deal with them by virtue of the American-style optimism. That is to say, this kind of spirit will last and encourage people. It also enriches the national spirit and develops the core national values. In the future, the American-style optimism will inject particular quality and promising future into the society which will become stronger and more innovative than ever before. For the American people, they will be tougher and more optimistic in the coming hard days.

Conclusion

The American-style optimism has had a significant influence on the society. Specially, the optimism reflected by the blockbuster *Forrest Gump* has implication for generations and generations of Americans. Teenagers and youth tend to be confused about their future. There is no doubt that Gump's optimism encourages them and gives them hope and light to fight against the darkest days and help them move on towards a promising and rosy prospective. The American-style optimism continues to spread out further and plays a vital role in instructing and guiding young generation to be optimistic. Then they will understand that the hardships and limitations will never pose insurmountable obstacles in their exploration of the world.

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