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That Way He Became a Father

“Like father, like son,” is a famous proverb in the eastern culture concerning a father-son relationship. The adage, which means that a son will have traits of his father as he grows up, contains notion that what connects a child to its parent is resemblance. The notion of resemblance supports a concept of blood, which symbolizes heredity, to construct a common idea that a relationship between father and son is defined naturally. However, “Like Father, Like Son,” a 2013 film by Hirokazu Koreeda, overturns the conventional wisdom implied in the aphorism after which the movie is titled. **The family drama provides an alternative definition of paternity by telling a story of a patriarch who conceived traditional values about fatherhood but eventually discards them.**

To begin with, the plot is created by a big single event and driven by four major conflicts, two of which are external and the others internal. The conflicts revolve around the male lead, Ryota, who is a successful businessman with a lovely housewife and a six-year-old son. In the beginning of the film, the protagonist learns from a hospital that his legal son, Keita, was accidentally switched with his biological child on the day of birth. Shortly afterward he meets his genetic son, Ryusei, and his father, Yukari, and faces a critical decision whether or not to exchange the children, which is the first inner conflict the lead character goes through. As Ryota tries to solve the issue casually by offering money to Yukari and his wife to take the both children, an external conflict also develops between him and the opposite family. Since the counterparty rejects the proposal with animosity, the tension between them lingers.

As opposed to the persisting one between the two families, the first internal conflict concludes quickly, largely due to the character of Ryota. He is a patriarchal figure who commits himself to work and shows little affection to Keita. He only wants his heir to emulate his excellence – for example, Ryota forces his son to attend piano schools and demands the boy to be outstanding and competitive like himself. However, to his father's disappointment, Keita is mediocre and demonstrates no aggressiveness. Nevertheless, the protagonist constantly seeks clues of excellence in the child from which he can read heredity because they are the only grounds for him to attach to his son. In a hospital scene where Ryota learns the truth about the kids, he sighs, "That was why (Keita was mediocre at everything)." For that reason, it was only a matter of time until the main character decides to exchange the children. However, after the trade, another external conflict arises as Ryusei does not admit Ryota as a father, compelling the latter to completely reestablish his notion of paternity. In other words, the film is a narrative where the lead character experiences a series of conflicts and grows up mentally through the process.

Besides, the narrative is an encounter between two radically different groups, and it uses a number of binary oppositions. On the one hand, Ryota's family lives in an apartment of a metropolis that represents verticality. Also, the household consists of a patriarch, a housewife and an only child, exemplifying a modern middle-class family. In addition, interactions between father and son are minimal, as shown in a scene where Keita takes a bath alone. On the other hand, Yukari's live in a cottage of a rural town and have three children. In addition, both parents pursue a career and share parenting, putting a lot of time in their children and asserting no authority. As opposed to Ryota, Yukari engages deeply with his kids and always bathes together with them. Furthermore, the tone of scenes in Ryota's house is cold and still while scenes of Yukari's involve much action and vivid colors. This strong contrast is embodied in one particular scene where they take a family photograph

together. In the *mis-en-scen *, Yukari's family members smile altogether and are the same height as parents are on their knees, while Ryota's stand still with their faces stiffened. A strong irony stems from the fact that the family of Ryota, which enjoys a high income and urban lifestyle, holds more conservative values, while Yukari's, of a rural town, adopts a more modern and democratic system.

Above all, the two patriarchs diverge firmly in their conception of paternity and approach to their child, which leads to the theme of the film. After their first interaction, they decide to send the switched children to each other's house in weekends to prepare for the possible exchange. Half a year later, Yukari questions the nurturing method of Ryota, claiming that it was he, not Ryota, who spent more time with Keita over the previous six months. When Ryota counters that he has more important tasks to do and playing with a child has minimal importance in rearing, Yukari exclaims, "No. Time is everything to a child!" This dialogue encapsulates the overall theme of whether paternity is constituted by blood, which symbolizes biological connection, or by time, social interactions. However, the former, which is the belief of the main character, begins to collapse once the two families swap children. Against Ryota's expectation, his biological son does not acknowledge him as a father. For example, on Ryota's request to call him father "because it is just the way it is," Ryusei questions back, "I don't know why it is just the way it is." Furthermore, Ryusei breaks away to Yukari's cottage out of loneliness and longing for the old home, deepening Ryota's agony. The conflict between the protagonist and his genetic child calms down as the former alters his attitude and leans toward a more affectionate parent. However, this change of attitude generates another inner conflict inside the lead character as he grows repentant for Keita and the previous six years.

Eventually, this inner conflict is resolved through a set of photographs that has significance in both a narrative and thematic sense. First, an act of taking pictures is

described as a symbol of giving affection, in which the protagonist shows no interest. Also, the final inner conflict of Ryota, whether or not to restore the original child, is resolved in a scene where he discovers a series of photos from a camera that Keita had used. He finds out that his son took pictures of him constantly, and most of those images feature Ryota showing his back toward the photographer, concentrating on his work or sleeping in the bed. The pictures confirm how poor the protagonist was as a father; as a result, he bursts into tears and decides to bring Keita back home. Additionally, the scene is a moment where the perception of the main character corresponds to the awareness of us, the audience. In other words, by looking at the picture Ryota is finally able to view himself in an objective manner, just as the audience has been observing him with a critical distance for the past running time.

Hence, the climax sequence sums up the change of the protagonist, using a couple of symbolic images that contrast with prior shots in the film. In the sequence, Ryota visits Keita in Yukari's home, Keita breaks away from him, and Ryota follows his child to a forked road of a park. They walk on a separate pathway of the road with shrubs between them while the father offers a sincere apology. As opposed to the photos Keita had taken, in these shots the son shows his back toward his father. Then, as the road finishes, they face each other directly and share a hug. This time Ryota kneels down to hug his son, in contrast to the family photograph early in the film. The image signifies that he abandoned the authoritative notion of fatherhood to which he had held fast and became a father to Ryota in the true sense of the word. Furthermore, from the thematic point of view, the sequence finalizes the main narrative in which the protagonist fixes his notion of paternity and returns to the non-biological son, completing the theme that a link between father and son is not absolute nor natural but a socially constructed relationship.

Subsequently, the final scene, in which the two families go into Yukari's cottage together, resolves the last remaining conflict and also amplifies the theme to the social

dimension. In the scene, Yukari and his wife invite members of Ryota's family for the first time of the film, and this reciprocal action indicates that the tension between the two groups that lasted over the plot has finally closed. Aside from the narrative point of view, this scene can also be interpreted as the authoritative and patriarchal lifestyle of Ryota's is absorbed into the more horizontal and democratic type of Yukari's. Today, following a significant drop of birth rates, disconnection within a family emerged as a major issue in Japan as well as other post-industrial countries. The problem is epitomized by the household of Ryota in the movie, and on the contrary, that of Yukari represents an ideal solution. By the ending the film suggests Yukari's as an alternative regarding how families today should be shaped in the era of nuclear and dual career families.

In conclusion, "Like Father, Like Son" is a tale of a man who grows up to become a true father, recognizing that paternity is not just based on ties of blood. Interestingly, the Korean version of the film's title, which translates into "That Way He Becomes a Father," summarizes the whole story and the theme in a more comprehensive way. It implies that one has to "become" a father, in other words, fatherhood is status that has to be achieved with effort. Therefore, the English version of the title and the Korean one form a beginning and end of the story – Ryota, who customarily believed that a father-son relationship is defined by blood, like the saying "like father, like son," abandons the notion and understands that communication and affection are more important to a child; that way, he becomes a true father.