

CHARACTERIZATION ANALYSIS OF THE MAIN CHARACTER IN THE FILM HACKSAW RIDGE (2016)

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ABSTRACT

In a movie, there are personalities developed by every character. The protagonist in the movie possesses traits that need to captivate the audience's attention. Thus, it is important to outline the attributes of the character's traits. For instance, in the film *Hacksaw Ridge*, the main character is portrayed with a steadfastness in his beliefs. Desmond Doss's character engages everyone who views the film, immersing them in the atmosphere and allowing them to experience what the character experiences. The aim of analyzing this main character is to understand the personality or qualities of Desmond Doss. The approach employed in carrying out this research is a qualitative method. The data collected for this study consists of dialogues from the character within the film *Hacksaw Ridge*. The focus of this study is undoubtedly on the character of the main protagonist himself. From the findings of this study, it is evident that Desmond Doss exhibits commendable traits, including bravery, patience, humor, determination, fairness, humor, and adherence to the Bible. This is illustrated by how the principal character conducts himself and how other characters respond to the main character.

Keywords: Film, Character, Main character

INTRODUCTION

Literary works, often referred to as *sastra* in Indonesian, are artistic expressions that reflect the intricate realities of human life through imaginative storytelling. These works, while fictional, are grounded in authentic experiences, offering insights into culture, behavior, philosophy, and emotion. Literature provides a unique mirror through which society can observe itself—its values, struggles, and ideals—distilled through the lens of creative narrative. It also serves dual purposes: to entertain and to educate, touching on universal themes that resonate across time and culture. The term *sastra* itself originates from the Sanskrit word meaning “writings” or “texts” that function as guidance or instruction. This etymology underscores the deep-rooted role of literature in shaping moral, social, and philosophical understanding. In Indonesian, *sastra* denotes refined language with high aesthetic and cultural value. These literary forms are not limited to books alone—they extend to oral traditions, digital media, and visual arts, including film.

Film, as a form of modern literature, holds significant power as a mass communication tool. Its visual and auditory elements allow audiences to emotionally engage with a story in a way that written text alone sometimes cannot. Cinema can inform, persuade, entertain, or provoke thought. Films also present narratives that deal with

human conflict, resilience, relationships, and moral dilemmas—much like traditional literary texts.

Among the many storytelling tools in film, characterization plays a central role. Characterization refers to the method used by filmmakers to construct the personality, motives, and development of the characters within a narrative. Whether through dialogue, behavior, or how other characters perceive them, the main character often serves as the heart of the story—especially in narratives rooted in personal conviction, heroism, or ethical struggle.

The film *Hacksaw Ridge* (2016), directed by Mel Gibson, is one such story. It tells the real-life tale of Desmond Doss, a U.S. Army medic and devout Seventh-day Adventist who refused to bear arms during World War II yet managed to save 75 soldiers during the Battle of Okinawa. Doss's character challenges conventional portrayals of heroism. Instead of fighting with weapons, he fights with faith, courage, and determination. The film's narrative is compelling not just for its dramatic war scenes, but for the moral strength and unwavering beliefs of its protagonist.

This study aims to conduct a characterization analysis of Desmond Doss using the theoretical framework proposed by Edgar V. Roberts. According to Roberts, character analysis can be done through four aspects: what the character says, what the character does, what other characters say about them, and what the author (or in film, the director/screenwriter) states about the character. By applying this framework, we can gain deeper insight into how Desmond Doss is constructed as a literary and cinematic figure.

Furthermore, examining Doss's character allows us to explore larger themes such as morality in wartime, religious conviction, nonviolence, and individual resistance against institutional expectations. As the narrative unfolds, Desmond's unwavering commitment to his principles challenges not only his superiors but the entire military system that expects compliance and uniformity.

Therefore, this paper seeks not only to analyze character traits but to contextualize them within the broader discourse of ethics, faith, and humanity in times of war. This approach enriches our understanding of Desmond Doss as more than a character in a story—he becomes a symbol of moral resistance and an embodiment of peace amidst chaos.

METHODS

This analysis is a descriptive study using a qualitative approach. This method was chosen because it provides a comprehensive explanation of the analysis results.

According to Syam (2000:74), the descriptive method is used to obtain detailed information about specific phenomena during the research process. To identify the characterization of the main character in *Hacksaw Ridge*, the researcher applied Edgar V. Roberts' theory (1983:41), which outlines four ways to analyze character traits in literary works:

1. What the character says about themselves
2. What the character does
3. What other characters say about the character being analyzed
4. What the author says about the character's personality

This theory views characters as general representations of people, particularly in terms of how they determine their fate through thoughts, language, and actions.

It emphasizes that dialogue, actions, and authorial commentary are key expressions used to create meaningful interactions between characters in a literary work.

The main character is central to a film, as the story revolves around them. Without the main character, the narrative cannot unfold. Due to this importance, this study focuses on analyzing the main character of *Hacksaw Ridge*, Desmond Doss. The data was collected from the film through listening and note-taking techniques. The primary data source consists of Desmond Doss's interactions with other characters in the film. To enhance the credibility of this qualitative study, the researcher also applied triangulation techniques by cross-referencing dialogue scenes with supporting visual and narrative cues from the film. This process ensured that the character traits attributed to Desmond Doss were not only based on spoken words but also on cinematic techniques such as facial expressions, tone, body language, background music, and scene context. This multi-layered analysis strengthens the validity of the data interpretation and helps reduce subjectivity by incorporating different narrative elements to support each character trait.

Furthermore, qualitative research in film analysis benefits from the researcher's interpretive lens, allowing for deeper engagement with the subject matter. Rather than relying on numerical data, this method emphasizes textual richness, enabling a more nuanced understanding of the film's characters and thematic expressions. The aim is not just to describe what Desmond Doss does, but to interpret why his actions matter and how they reflect deeper philosophical or moral convictions. This method acknowledges that meaning in film is often layered and symbolic, and therefore requires a reflective and critical approach from the researcher. The qualitative approach in this study is particularly suitable, as it prioritizes meaning over measurement and context over categorization.

RESULTS

Findings from the film *Hacksaw Ridge* highlight the following characteristics of the main character:

Main Character

1. Desmond Thomas Doss or Desmond Doss

Desmond Doss is portrayed as the main character in *Hacksaw Ridge*, an American soldier who firmly refuses to carry or use a weapon. The story centers around his defiance and the reactions of those around him. His character displays several key traits:

a. Kind-Hearted

Data 1

Doss: *"Come on, I got you, just breath."*

Irv: *"Hey!hey! give him a shot of morphine and move on. He's not going to last a day."*

Ralph: *"Please, please, Doss, no, no. Don't leave me.I've got kids!"*

Doss: *"I ain't going anywhere. I'm going to get you home. I got you Ralph, okay? I'm going to get you home."*

(Hacksaw Ridge, 1:16:33)

Desmond Doss is portrayed as a kind-hearted individual, as seen in the quote above. The quote is taken from a scene on the battlefield where Desmond sees one of his comrades, Ralph, with a severely injured leg. Without hesitation, Desmond rushes to help

him. One of the medics, Irv, suggests that Desmond should just give Ralph morphine and move on to help others. However, Desmond chooses to stay and assist Ralph instead.

Data 2

Captain Glover : *“How’d you get down, son?”*
Hollywood : *“Doss, Howell still up there.”*
Captain Glover : *“What? Howell and Doss did this?”*
Hollywood : *“Mustly just Doss.”*
Captain Glover : *“Just Doss?”*
Hollywood : *“Just Doss.”*
(*Hacksaw Ridge, 1:54:50*)

Captain Glover approaches Hollywood, who has just come down from the battlefield, and asks how he managed to get down. Lucky then explains that everyone who just made it back was helped by Desmond Doss — and that it was Desmond alone who did it.

b. Brave

Data 3

Captain Glover: *“We have to go back up tomorrow. I realize that tomorrow is your sabbath. Most of these men don’t believe the same way you do. But, they believe so much in how much you believe. And what you did on that ridge, it’s nothing short of a miracle, and they want a piece of it. And they’re not going to go up there without you.”*(Talking to desmond)
(*Hacksaw Ridge, 2:02:15*)

Desmond Doss’s bravery in helping his comrades while everyone else had already retreated from the battlefield became a miracle in the eyes of his fellow soldiers.

c. Patient

Data 4

Smitty : *“Hold on here, what is this?”*
Desmond : *“Give me that.”*
Smitty : *“Now, this would be kind of broad that deserves a real man.”*
Desmond : *“Give me that back.”*
Smitty : *“Please.”*
Desmond : *“Please”*
Smitty : *“Please give me that back Smitty.”*
Desmond : *“Please give me that back Smitty.”*
(*Hacksaw Ridge, 41:26*)

The dialogue quoted above takes place while Desmond Doss is still in military training. He firmly refuses to handle a weapon, which angers and frustrates his fellow trainees. As a result, they beat and bully him. Despite this harsh treatment, Desmond remains patient and endures the bullying without retaliation.

d. Humorous

Data 5

Desmond: *“How’s this doing? Okay, not bad. Let me see, it looks much worse than it is. Girls will still want to kiss you.”*

(Hacksaw Ridge, 1:53:24)

Desmond displays a humorous personality, as seen in the quote above. He tries to cheer up his friend, who is wounded from the war, even in the midst of a tense and stressful situation.

e. Determined

Data 6

Desmond: *“Please, Lord, help me get one more. One more, One more.”*

(Hacksaw Ridge, 1:50:35)

The determination of Desmond can be seen from the quote above, where he kept praying to God to help him save one more person. He continued to say this prayer until he had saved 75 of his friends, even though his hands were severely injured.

f. Faithful to the Bible

Data 7

Dr. Lynchburg : *“Was it God told you not to pick up a rifle?”*

Desmond : *“God says not to kill. That’s one of his most important Commandments.”*

(Hacksaw Ridge, 43:12)

Desmond Doss firmly held onto his beliefs, as seen in the Bible. As shown in the quote above, where he is being interviewed by Dr. Lynchburg, a military psychiatrist, Desmond remained steadfast in the Biblical commandment that forbids killing. He stuck to his principle of not carrying a weapon because he did not want to kill.

DISCUSSION

From data 1 to data 7 regarding the characteristics of the main character using Edgar V. Roberts' theory, Desmond Doss is depicted as good, brave, patient, humorous, determined, and steadfast in his faith in the Bible. In Data 1, the conversation is categorized into four ways of analyzing a character, where Desmond continues to help Ralph even though Irv suggested just giving Ralph morphine and leaving him behind. Data 2 refers to Hollywood's statement that Desmond, along with other soldiers, helped them. This fits into the four methods of analyzing a character based on what other characters say about the one being analyzed. Data 3, 4, and 5 fall under the four methods of analyzing a character through the actions of the character. Data 6 is categorized as part of the four methods of analyzing a character, specifically how the author describes the character. In this case, the author not only shows the character's dialogue but also describes his determination in helping his comrades. Data 7 is similar to the previous ones, as it is based on what the character does, reflecting the methods of analyzing a character through their actions.

Desmond Doss's character stands out not only because of his actions but also because of the broader implications of his moral and religious stance. In a narrative dominated by violence, Desmond becomes a counterpoint—he does not conform to the

typical hero archetype who wins through physical power. Instead, his strength lies in endurance, sacrifice, and conviction. This challenges traditional war narratives where masculinity is tied to aggression. His passive resistance serves as a new interpretation of bravery: one that prioritizes saving lives over taking them.

Additionally, the way other characters evolve in their perception of Doss contributes significantly to his characterization. At the beginning of the film, his fellow soldiers view him with suspicion, ridicule, and even hostility. They interpret his refusal to touch a weapon as weakness or cowardice. However, by the end of the film, their attitudes shift dramatically. The same men who once mocked him now refuse to fight unless he is present with them. This transformation reflects not only the impact of Desmond's actions but also highlights the human capacity for respect, empathy, and change. From a narrative technique perspective, the director uses slow-motion battle scenes and intimate close-ups during key emotional moments to reinforce Desmond's internal struggle and the impact of his decisions. These cinematic tools help the audience connect with the protagonist's mindset, especially when he is alone on the battlefield, repeatedly praying to save "just one more." It is during these moments that Desmond transcends the role of a mere character and becomes a representation of faith in action. Beyond observable traits like bravery or kindness, Desmond Doss's character also holds deeper psychological and symbolic dimensions. Psychologically, Doss displays traits associated with moral identity and spiritual resilience. He is not just committed to his beliefs—he is internally at peace with them, even when others reject or punish him for it. This self-awareness and mental strength are central to his resistance against conformity in a military system that values obedience and aggression. Desmond's personal journey also reflects the struggle between individuality and institutional pressure, a common theme in war narratives. While the army represents order, hierarchy, and standardization, Desmond stands as a symbol of conscience—an individual who resists for a cause higher than institutional loyalty. This adds psychological complexity to his character and positions him as an internal rebel—not through violence, but through conviction.

Symbolically, Desmond Doss can be seen as a Christ-like figure within the story. His role as a healer rather than a destroyer, his repeated sacrifices, and even his physical suffering during the rescue of fellow soldiers all resemble spiritual imagery often associated with martyrdom. His prayer—"Help me get one more"—functions not just as a plea for strength but also as a reflection of his calling to serve others selflessly. He saves lives not for glory, but out of duty and compassion, aligning his actions with the Christian value of agape (selfless love).

In cinematic terms, the use of lighting and camera focus often places Desmond in frames where he appears isolated or surrounded by chaos—visually reinforcing his role as a moral center amid destruction. His presence in the film acts as a moral compass, grounding the story in themes of peace, healing, and inner strength, which makes his character not only essential to the plot but also symbolically rich for interpretation.

CONCLUSION

Desmond Doss, as the main character in *Hacksaw Ridge*, serves as an extraordinary example of principled heroism. His kindness, bravery, patience, humor, determination, and faithfulness to the Bible not only define his character but also redefine what it means to be a hero in a wartime context. Rather than conforming to the archetype of a combat-ready soldier, Desmond stands apart through his pacifist principles,

unwavering belief in nonviolence, and relentless drive to save lives—even in the face of death. Each trait Desmond exhibits is revealed through various narrative techniques—dialogue, action, and the reactions of others—which align with Edgar V. Roberts’ theoretical framework. His character is not merely described; it is shown through his perseverance under pressure, the transformative journey of those around him, and his quiet yet powerful defiance of military norms. These combined elements portray a protagonist who is morally consistent and deeply human.

Beyond the scope of the film itself, Desmond Doss’s story prompts a broader reflection on ethical courage and spiritual integrity. In an age where war narratives often glorify violence, *Hacksaw Ridge* offers a compelling alternative: a tale of heroism rooted in compassion, service, and moral resolve. Desmond’s refusal to bear arms was not an act of rebellion but a commitment to a higher moral authority—his faith and conscience. His story invites viewers and scholars alike to question the standard definitions of bravery and to consider that standing firm in one’s beliefs, even when alone, is one of the greatest acts of courage.

Furthermore, the character of Desmond Doss demonstrates the impact that one individual can have on a collective group. By staying true to his convictions, he not only saved lives but also inspired a fundamental shift in the attitudes of those around him. The once-hostile soldiers came to respect and admire him, even depending on his presence for morale. This character arc illustrates the contagious nature of integrity—how one person’s steadfastness can lead others to reconsider their own values and beliefs. The characterization of Desmond Doss in *Hacksaw Ridge* affirms the power of film as a literary medium to convey complex human emotions, ethical dilemmas, and transformative journeys. His legacy, both as a real historical figure and as a film character, serves as a timeless reminder that true courage often lies not in wielding power, but in exercising restraint and compassion. Through thoughtful analysis, we come to appreciate Desmond not only as a protagonist in a film but as a beacon of hope and humanity in a world often defined by conflict. The relevance of Desmond Doss’s character extends beyond the film and academic discussion. In today’s world, where violence and division often dominate narratives in media and real life, a story like *Hacksaw Ridge* offers a profound counter-narrative. It reminds viewers that conviction, kindness, and humanity still hold power, even in the darkest times. Through analyzing his character, we are reminded that one person—armed only with faith and compassion—can impact not only lives on the battlefield but also hearts and minds far beyond it.

In academic settings, this analysis can contribute to deeper explorations of literary and cinematic heroes who break the mold. Unlike traditional protagonists driven by vengeance or victory, Desmond Doss is a protagonist who wins without defeating anyone. His example opens up discussions about ethical storytelling, nonviolent resistance, and the representation of real-life heroes in fictional formats.

In essence, Desmond Doss serves not just as a character to be studied, but as a symbol of peace, endurance, and moral clarity. His characterization shows that heroism comes in many forms, and sometimes the greatest act of bravery is the refusal to compromise one’s values—especially when everything around you insists you should.

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