

The Theme of Coming-of-Age in *Breath*

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In the exploration of the theme of coming-of-age in *Breath*, this paper is to discuss the role played by peer, guru, woman, and guilds respectively in the growing of the protagonists and hopes to arrive at the conclusion that formation can only be accomplished only if one seeks to reconcile with self, possibly with help from guilds who are often imperfect in Winton's fictions. Besides, the analysis indicates that the novelist seems to be spinning an allegory of a young nation of Australia that is seeking adulthood through the story of the boy's initiation.

Keywords: Bildungsroman, *Breath*, Tim Winton, coming-of-age

Introduction

Defining Bildungsroman

Bildungsroman defies unanimously agreed definition, although it is widely accepted that it originated from German literature with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795) as the prototype work. Ever since its inception, Bildungsroman has undergone many adaptations and modifications and has been developed to a kaleidoscope of forms under the influence of new literature trends and theories. For the convenience of discussion, we would like to define Bildungsroman by listing three definitive features as follows. Firstly, the protagonists are innocent juveniles, usually male. Secondly, many factors participate in the formation of the protagonist's identity and here four elements, namely, peer, guru, woman and guilds will be discussed. Thirdly, the protagonists' personality and psychology must change and develop, although not necessarily become better. Actually, in modern Bildungsroman, the protagonists usually hold suspicious and critical attitudes towards mainstream values. Thus, they may form independent judgment and experience epiphany in social transactions and eventually flee away from the society and retreat into a world of their own illusion (Sun, 2020, p. 430, translated by this author).

Literature Review

As an Australian Bildungsroman, *Breath* has aroused wide critical appraisal worldwide. Roie Thomas discussed the masculinities in the novel against the backdrop of Australian surfing culture; Salhia Ben-Messahel noticed the construction of Australian identity through feeling a strong sense of belonging in *Breath*; Nicholas Birns discussed the exceptionality and neoliberalism in *Breath* (2014). The novel is widely discussed by Chinese critics too. Xu Zaizhong (2013) interpreted *Breath* in the context of Counter Culture Movement in the 1970s in Australia. Hou Fei and Wang Labao (2019) analyzed the "reasoning underlying the protagonists' risk-taking" (p. 52). Hou (2013) also explored "how hegemonic power is exposed through the extreme game of surfing" (p. 126).

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As far as the author knows, Liu Hanbing's (2017) M.A. thesis is the only research on *Breath* from perspective of Bildungsroman. Since Tim Winton is so obsessed with stories about how teenagers grow up in small towns, the theme of coming-of-age in his oeuvre obviously needs further exploration. Therefore, in the reading and analysis of the novel, this paper is to discuss the role played by peer, guru, woman, and guilds respectively and hopes to shed new light on the Australian Bildungsroman *Breath*.

Seeking Adventure in Growth

Breath narrates the growth of two teenagers in a small coastal town in south-west Australia in the 1970s in the macrohistorical period of hippie movement across the US, Europe, and Australia. Being far away from the cultural and economic centre of the nation, the life at the small town is monotonous and stifling. What's more, it is implied that the townsfolk, mostly emigrants, are deeply estranged with the landscape. What makes *Breath* unique as a novel of formation is that the development of plot is a non-linear narration with flashbacks and the narrative is frequently interrupted by an out-text voice from the adult Pike who analyzes, comments, or even criticizes the events experienced by his younger self. Namely, there exists a "dialogic relationship between the narrator and the textual world" (Riquelme, 1983, p. 66). The "double temporal perspective" makes it possible for Pike to possess "dual status as within and behind, as character and as narrator" (p. 66). The dialogue between the two voices better depicts the conflicts, bewilderment, and poignancy felt by the central characters in growth.

Peer—The Feral Rival

When the consciousness of self in the 11-year-old boy Bruce Pikelet wakes up, he begins to observe the world with critical eyes. He is disappointed at both the town and townsfolk. Particularly, Pikelet deems his parents timid, silent, and conservative so they are unable to discipline him timely or offer any guidance for his growing-up. Sometimes their aloofness is misinterpreted as acquiescence, which allows their son to go further into "false ultimates" (Thomas, 2010). To young Pikelet, family does not lack love but cannot satisfy his desire for something more psychological or aesthetic. In contrast, his playmate Loonie, who lives with his stepmother and a ferocious father, is a frequent victim of domestic violence.

Characters in Bildungsroman are usually ones with special potential. They may not be geniuses but at least they possess potential and desire to be extraordinary (as cited in Sun, 2020, p. 10). All through his puberty, Pikelet is trying not to be ordinary. The friendship between Pikelet and Loonie is also initiated by their common obsession with unconventional risky games. However, their relationship is gradually poisoned after their encounter with the surfing superman Bill Sanderson (hence "Sando"). In their childhood games, they challenge each other but share funs but in their surfing apprenticeship, competition dominates. Peer pressure turns Loonie from a bosom childhood playmate to a feral rival.

We have to admit that Pikelets and Loonie are fundamentally different despite their common fascination for adventure. First, Pikelet is the one who thinks and then does while Loonie does whatever is required without hesitation. In the training periods, Pikelet always evaluates the risks they are taking. But Loonies' love for adventure seems ruthless and insatiable and he is never bothered by the possibility of death. Second, Loonie's devotion to Sando is steadfast but Pikelet is ambivalent. He is bold enough to query and decline. Third, besides bravery, Pikelet's pursuit embodies an aesthetic element. But, "Loonie was often a triumph of guts over technique" (Winton, 2008, p. 126). The reason behind their discrepancies may lie in the different family backgrounds. Loonie's childhood definitely lacks love, care, or anything warm and soft, which results in the callousness in his

personality. As a result, Loonie is unable to show affection or develop compassion for Pikelet. Thus, the adult Pike concludes that Loonie is “less of a friend than I’d imagined” (Winton, 2008, pp. 110-111). Loonie is actually caught between two worlds. He feels ignored and marginalized in the secular world and then hopes to prove himself in the world of surfing, which proves invalid too.

At the end of a classic Bildungsroman, the protagonists usually accept social conventions and become a responsible citizen in community and achieve formation. However, in contemporary stories, the heroes refuse to condescend and choose to fight against. Therefore, protagonists do not always achieve good ends. In this novel, not only that Loonie’s development is unsuccessful, but Pikelet’s also ends in chaos on account of negative impacts from Sando.

Guru—The Hegemonic Dominator

Schools are the very places where the young are educated, but it is seldom the case in Winton’s oeuvre, because many protagonists are school dropouts. In *Breath*, Loonie soon drops out of school and Pikelet remains “standoffish” (Winton, 2008, p. 181) at school. Pikelet and Loonie’s real initiation does not commence until they meet Sando, a god-like mythic figure in the circle of surfing. However, as a surfer, Sando has obviously passed his primetime and he is afraid of getting old as his wife Eva puts it. Training the two apprentices and bringing them into his game make him feel young. From 12 to 15, Pikelet spends three years following Sando and staying aloof from his parents who are deeply hurt. According to the narrator Pike, he cannot reconstruct an intimate relationship with his mum until her death. So to speak, the association with Sando has irreparably broken Pikelet’s bond with his parents.

Neither Pikelet nor Loonie has benefited from the apprenticeship. Sando leads them to try one after another perilous spots for surfing and doctrines about “fears” (Winton, 2008, p. 142). Taking advantage of their innocent desire to be extraordinary, Sando attempts to persuade them into surfing at Nautilus, which is never an ideal place for surfers but a “sharkpit” and “a navigation hazard” with “multiple warnings” (pp. 139-140). As has been mentioned above, Pikelet is contemplative and he thinks and judges despite the strong desire to attempt. So eventually he declines. The incident marks a transition in Pikelet’s attitudes towards Sando from blind worship to serious suspicion. Later, the narrator Pike reflects: “(a)t that age we were physically undeveloped, too small to safely manage what we set out to do, and he did it without our parents’ consent” (Winton, 2008, p. 106).

Furthermore, the relationships among the three can be interpreted from another perspective. According to Hou Fei (2013), the 13-year-old Loonie symbolizes Australia in its early stage which was then a young state yearning for identification (p. 124). Then, Sando represents the hegemonic United States which tries to exploit and control Australia to its own sake. In the metaphor, if Australia follows the US the way Loonie follows Sando, the nation will suffer loss too. In fact, Australia has been dragged into the mire of the Vietnam War by the US. Through the contrast between the two boys, it is obvious that the novelist hopes his nation to be cautious, critical, and independent in international arena, the way Pikelet behaves in front of Sando.

Many researchers have commented on the role played by a mentor in the development of youth. But not all mentors are beneficial. Undeniably, Sando has taught Pikelet and Loonie a lot about surfing skills. But generally, he impedes the smooth growth of his apprentices. In essence, Sando is a hegemonic dominator rather than a responsible mentor. Loonie is led astray to become his assistant in drug trafficking business abroad and killed. Pikelet’s trust in him is spoiled too so that Pikelet is unable to pull himself together to grow into manhood. Their guru initiates the seeds of pursuing risks and being extraordinary without showing them how to end. Therefore,

Pike has to grope for the answer on his own all through his life. Sando, a city fellow from Melbourne, retreats to the small coastal town to seek “something pure” (Winton, 2008, p. 156). Maybe he has achieved his goal because Pikelet and Loonie’s admiration for him is pure and their passion for surfing is pure too. But in their interactions with Sando and Eva, what Pikelet has lost is nothing less than purity of adolescence.

Women—The Irresponsible Seducer

In a classic Bildungsroman, a boy becomes a man after experiencing intimate love relationship with a girl, which is usually taken as a symbol of maturity and end of boyhood. However, the love affair between the 15-year-old Pikelet and the 25-year-old Eva, Sando’s wife, is ominous from the beginning and ends in tragedy for both.

The surfing trio disintegrates with Sando and Loonie’s departure for Indonesia, which throws Pikelet and Eva into deep hells of loneliness and self-doubt. Then, partly to dispel her loneliness and partly to satisfy her desire for something risky, Eva seduces Pikelet and the latter is soon trapped in the web of sexuality weaved by the experienced former.

Winton names her Eva which resembles Eve to insinuate at least one common thing shared by them: They both lure man to try the forbidden fruit, which in this novel takes the form of the incestuous love. It is a physical love that is based on something mismatching. For instance, there is a 10-year age gap between them. Besides, one is innocent whereas the other is sophisticated. However, Eva lures Pikelet, the boy who cannot resist temptation at first and then becomes addicted. Ever worse, Eva forces Pikelet to play game of asphyxia in sex with her, which is unethical because if they are careless, she may die of suffocation and he will be the murderer. Finally, it is worthwhile to mention that Eva shares hash with Pikelet more than once, which further degenerates him.

Sexual love is a lesson for the male protagonists in Bildungsroman and a man can be made or ruined by a woman. This incestuous love makes it impossible for the young fellow to build successful relationship with his wife in future. The boy’s ability to love seems to have been overdrafted before he comes of age. Eva, the seducer, is surely to be blamed. Like her husband, she is equally irresponsible in Pikelet’s formation years. The adult Pike feels regretful and concludes that “... I held her morally accountable for all my grown-up troubles” (Winton, 2008, p. 208).

Guilds—The Imperfect Redemptors

The old days spent in the mill town Sawyer have predominately determined the type of person he will grow into and the trajectory of life he will pursue. Pikelet has lost his innocence in the affair with Eva and his conviction in life on account of the apprenticeship under Sando. After much introspection about his experiences in surfing, he chooses to become an ordinary person, which is not so bad as he admits later. However, sequelae of adolescent traumas manifest in one way or another, which just makes living a normal life impossible. Eventually, he loses everything and becomes “a voluntary patient” at a psychiatric ward where his sense of guilt is ruthlessly laid bare and lashed at by a wardmate who always carries a bible with him. Christianity has always been a necessary element in Winton’s fictions (McCredden, 2024, p. 176). Pike self-mockingly admits the chaotic state of his life: His wife is now his neighbour’s wife and his old neighbour’s wife is dead (Winton, 2008, p. 256). The bible-carrying wardmate’s reprimands force him to confront with his unbearable past, which paves the way for moving forward. Finally, he decides to “put it all behind me and move on” (Winton, 2008, p. 258).

However, real salvation does not begin until he meets “a defrocked priest” who was once “an alcoholic” (Winton, 2008, p. 258). “Winton’s human beings and their institutions can be weak, cowardly, or violent, but can also become the vessels of love and redemption” (McCredden, 2024, p. 176). Namely, characters like “disgraced priest” in Winton’s *The Shepherd’s Hut* (2018) and an itinerant preacher in *That Eye, That Sky* (1986) can still be redemptive. Such figures are not flawless but they offer redemption in time for the protagonists who are desperate for any meaning or purpose in life. Pike and the priest spend half a year beside a dry salt lake where they are both redeemed. “I went on and had another life” (Winton, 2008, p. 259). Eventually, Pike works as a paramedic who is able to seek comfort in helping others and achieve a life of meaning and significance. The imperfect guilds, such as the psychiatric wardmate and the unfrocked priest are true redeemers who finally help the protagonist out.

Conclusion

In this Bildungsroman, Tim Winton depicted the coming-of-age stories of two boys with focus on Pikelet, the contemplative one. The protagonist oscillates among various forces to form his identity. As is read here, the childhood playmate Loonie turns out to be a feral rival rather than a bosom friend; the much worshipped guru is a hegemonic dominator rather than a responsible mentor; the woman who initiates him in sex is an irresponsible seducer rather than a true lover. Thus, this paper is to arrive at the conclusion that formation can only be accomplished only if one seeks to reconcile with self under the direction of guilds who are often not flawless in Winton’s fictions. In addition, through the novel, Winton is insinuating Australia’s blind following the US in the Vietnam War. Therefore, it is justifiable to deduce that Winton hopes his nation to learn lessons from history and take a more independent stance. Hence, this coming-of-age novel does not only explore the initiation of teenagers in the 1970s; it is more an allegory of a young nation of Australia that is becoming more mature in international arena.

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