

Dilemmas and Possibilities of Re-Growth of the Elderly: An Analysis of the Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry from the Perspective of Initiation Story

Yuxuan Jiang

College of International Studies, Shenzhen University, Shenzhen, Guangdong, 518061, China

Keywords: Pilgrimage, Initiation Story, Re-Growth

Abstract: British author Rachel Joyce's debut novel, *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*, focuses on the spiritual and psychological dilemmas of the elderly, attempting to summon their spiritual recovery by way of a pilgrimage. Around this theme, the novel outlines the family relationship of the main character Harold in the form of interpolation and explores the possibility of his re-growth. This essay draws out Harold's past, present and future from Plato's three questions of life, and based on them, tentatively analyses the process and results of the re-growth and metamorphosis of the elderly.

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction to Rachel Joyce

Rachel Joyce is the author of the Sunday Times and international bestseller *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*, which was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Book Prize and longlisted for the Man Booker Prize. Her second novel, *Perfect*, was published in July 2013 to great critical acclaim. Rachel's books have been translated into thirty-six languages, and two are in development for films. She was awarded the Specsavers National Book Awards 'New Writer of the Year' in December 2012. Rachel has also written *A Faraway Smell of Lemon*, a short story exclusive to the eBook.

In addition to writing books, Rachel has also written over 20 original afternoon plays for BBC Radio 4, major adaptations for the Classic Series, *Woman's Hour* and also a TV drama adaptation for BBC2. In 2007 she won the Tinniswood Award for best radio play.

1.2 Theoretical Foundation

Initiation story, a literary genre, originates from the German word "Bildungsroman", which is the novel that focuses on the growth of the protagonist. As Mordecai Marcus puts it in *What is an Initiation Story*, an initiation story may be said to show its young protagonist experiencing a significant change of knowledge about the world or himself, or a change of character, or of both.[1]

Characterization and analysis are the soul of a literary work. There are two main dimensions in analysing the growth of characters: the physical dimension and the psychological dimension (or spiritual dimension). The initiation story is a form of fiction that focuses on the process of

individual development and psychological maturation of characters. Traditionally, it's educational in nature, with an emphasis on the progression of the young protagonist from ignorance to maturity. With the development of literature and the evolution of the times, initiation story itself has been "growing up" and no longer strictly adheres to the narrative pattern of "temptation-departure-ordeals-confusion-epiphany", but has derived various expression paradigms, and their main theme has also changed from a purely educational one. [2] The main theme of the novel has also expanded from a normal educational novel to a novel with a critical, religious and humanistic nature.

The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry can be considered as an initiation story in a broad sense, that is, from the perspective of the old, looking back on the memories of growth and reflecting on the youth that has passed, which is an exceptional innovation in this field.

2. The Progress of Initiation

During the journey of life, "Who am I? Where was I from? Where am I going?" These three fundamental questions of every individual's lifetime, proposed by Plato, haunt and force each of us to painstakingly seek for his or her own answers. The same is true of Harold's story, where the three questions correspond to his past, present and future. There is no doubt that the study of these questions is the groundwork for exploring the true outcome and meaning of Harold's re-growth.

2.1 Where did I come from? – Unfortunate Childhood

Harold had an incomplete childhood, which left a deep and grave shadow in his heart and posed a considerable obstacle to his healthy growth.

The construction of oneself is inseparable from both the self and the other for the simple reason that the gaze and attention of the other is of immense significance in the process of building up identity.[3] What was missing in Harold's growth process was precisely the gaze and attention from his parents. After his mother gave birth to him, she did not provide him with competent care, while Harold learned from a young age to make his mother laugh in a variety of comical ways. However, his mother abandoned the family with only one letter left - "New Zealand is a wonderful place. I had to go. Muttering was not me..." [4] On top of that, Harold's father, who should have given Harold more love, blamed him for his mother's departure and became more indifferent to him, even bringing home different women on a frequent basis. It wasn't until Harold's sixteenth birthday that, "...his father had presented him with an overcoat on his sixteenth birthday and shown him the door. The coat wasn't new; it smelled of mothballs, and there was a bus ticket in the inside pocket", [4] his childhood came to an abrupt end.

Under such circumstances, Harold is not able to construct a comprehensive self-identity. Through the description of this 65-year-old man, we can recognize that this is still an abandoned little boy.

2.2 Who Am I? – Absence of the Roles of a Father and a Husband

Although this little boy has become an adult physically, he has been living in a state of lack of self-identity, so needless to say, he is in no position to be a qualified father and husband. In his family and working place, he has become accustomed to silence, to being neglected and abandoned.

"And even though he had done what his father never had - he had found work, supported a wife and son, and loved them, if only from the sidelines - it sometimes occurred to Harold that the silence of his early years had followed him into his marital home, and lodged itself behind the carpet and curtains and wallpaper." [4] Simultaneously, Harold's parents' "genes" were passed on to

him - he was never ready to be a good father as well. As a father, he did not know how to communicate with his son David- When his son drowned and called for help, he first squatted on the shore to untie his shoelaces; watched his son indulging in drugs but did not interfere. Finally, the dysfunctional father-son relationship ended with David's suicide.

What's more, after David's death, in the face of his wife's grief and alienation, he still did nothing as a husband, and gradually the couple separated, sitting under the same roof but for their own affairs.

Harold's daily routine can be concluded as one sentence - "...spends every day in the same chair." [4] His life is not dynamic, like a pool of stagnant water, and more importantly, he does not crave changes.

2.3 Where Am I Going? – Unexpected Opportunity

In literary works, most of the departures have the overtone of necessity and compulsion, primarily due to the unbearable status quo and the choice to leave in search of a new state of existence. [5]

In *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*, Harold's departure is obviously accidental, he does not want to escape from the situation of life, and the act of leaving originates only from a stimulating inspiration. After receiving the miserable news that his old friend Queenie was severely ill, Harold, who is struggling to find a way to comfort his old friend, hears the words of the gas station girl, which enlighten him, "trusting what you don't know and going for it. Believing you can make a difference." [4] Rather than giving him answers, the girl's words inspire Harold to rediscover his self-worth and to dare to believe in something that seemed impossible.

Subsequently, Harold sets out on a pilgrimage full of hardships and challenges, with a spur-of-the-moment idea and determination, and a letter to his friend in hand. The journey, which lasts 87 days and spans the whole England, is both a physical pilgrimage and a journey of spiritual salvation across time and space.

3. The Result of Initiation

3.1 Harold's Initiation

For the elderly, vitality and passion are the beginning of re-growth, which drives them to ignore the limits of time and space and to rely on their inner beliefs to fulfil their commitments. Thus, the formation of this faith is the process of self-redemption, and the moment he sets out from the gas station, Harold has already completed a part of self-redemption.

In the course of his pilgrimage, Harold encounters all kinds of people. He changes from silence to self-awareness, from self-absorption to cheerfulness, from accepting help from others to offering it to others, reversing his image from a mediocre person to a spiritual leader, and miraculously turning a one-man journey on foot into a pilgrimage with a group of people. In the interactions with them, Harold constantly remembers his childhood, recalls David and Maureen, and in the process of reminiscing, he gradually understands the flaws of his past growth, recognizes his responsibilities, and realizes his inner self awareness, so as to redeem himself from the shadow of his past.

Additionally, Harold's self-redemption is reflected in his final compromise and understanding of an uncontrollable fate. Harold's pilgrimage lasted 87 days and covered 627 miles, just to bring a hope of survival to his friend Queenie. When Harold eventually reaches Queenie's hospital room, he begins to fear confronting Queenie's death and the collapse of his faith. And in fact, he has long been less vulnerable than he thought - the vicissitudes of life of the pilgrimage have turned into a strong force to support him to embrace the world. Therefore, when Maureen, who is trying to

comfort him, is in the cold morgue, he extends a warm hand to her, which means that Harold accepts the result of Queenie's death, truly completes the internal self-recognition, and perfects the perception and interpretation of the external world. The end of the pilgrimage was the beginning of Harold's brand-new life.

3.2 Maureen's Initiation

In addition to Harold, his wife Maureen also indirectly participates in the pilgrimage, thus completing the re-growth of the elderly.

Maureen was originally a young woman who loved fantasy, but the reality of helplessness and the death of her son made her lonely and reticent; it was not until Harold's trip that she recalled her prior happiness and was overwhelmed with love and concern for her husband as her animosity melted away.

Hence, when Harold crossed England with his frail body, Maureen also looked back on most of her life in a spiritual journey - she saw herself doing everything for her child without ever encouraging Harold to participate; she saw the mother who was screaming from the shore when David was drowning but did nothing as well. Maureen found the self she was afraid to face in the past, so she took stock of herself and then forgave Harold, who had a growth defect. When Harold has nothing to lose and is tempted to give up the idea of pilgrimage, Maureen offers Harold encouragement and provides substantial help.

In the end, Maureen also came to St. Bernadine's Hospice and accepted Queenie's death together with Harold, while they comforted each other and went home. At this point, Maureen has also accomplished the redemption of her own spirit.

4. Conclusion

At the end of the novel, Harold and Maureen recall the joyous time when they first met and laughed over a perfectly ordinary remark, and then, together, they broke into laughter. In a nutshell, the story ends with happiness after an incredible pilgrimage. Closing the book as well as my eyes, I seemed to foresee a happy future for these two old people after their re-growth and metamorphosis in their twilight years, and a harmonious family that has returned.

By and large, Rachel Joyce takes the departure of a retired old man as an entry point and explores the plight of the spiritual world of the elderly and the possibility of their re-growth from a unique perspective, which is a distinctive exploration. No matter how late this growth comes, this novel portrays a persistent faith in growth, a watchfulness and vigilance of human efforts.

Nowadays, most modern people are bound by the world's fame and fortune, forgetting their true hearts, putting on the mask of hypocrisy, and being constrained by life, not to mention the pursuit of self, individuality, along with the meaning of survival and life. Therefore, the article is also the author's admonition to people, on the one hand, we should learn from Harold's courage and perseverance to take the first step; on the other hand, we should also fulfil our social role while leaving some space to explore our true selves. Only by exploring the balance between our spiritual world and the external objective world, we can truly realize our self-worth.

References

- [1] Marcus M. (1960). *What is an initiation story?* *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 19(2), 221-228.
- [2] Xiuming X. (2006). *A Review of 20th Century Bildungsroman Studies*. *Modern Literary Magazine* (6):35-38.
- [3] Lei H. (2017). *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry: The Double Redemption of Walking and Waiting*. *Journal of Lanzhou Institute of Education* (8): 9-10.
- [4] Joyce R. (2012). *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*. New York: Random House.
- [5] Liqiang X. (2006). *Exploring the Narrative Technique and Aesthetic Implications of Run-Away Discourse*. *Chongqing Social Sciences* (11):36-40.