

The Investigation of Herman Melville's *Redburn* as a Bildungsroman Novel

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Abstract: This article will attempt to investigate if Herman Melville's *Redburn* could be categorized as a bildungsroman novel. This will be done through the application of the characteristics of the bildungsroman genre to the novel through basically examining the protagonist, Redburn, as well as the circumstances that he goes through. The protagonist normally encounters a number of experiences that are to play a major role in presumably initiating a more advanced state of awareness and sound judgement that are typical in the behavior of the protagonist of such a genre. Other narrative subgenres involve hardships or adventures, but what is of crucial significance in defining the bildungsroman genre in particular is the idea of growth and maturity that influences the emotional, psychological, or mental aspects of the protagonist.

Key words: Liverpool • Experience • Exposure and Adulthood

INTRODUCTION

Herman Melville's *Redburn* seems to fit well in the definition of a bildungsroman novel. According to Thomas L. Jeffers in his *Apprenticeships: The Bildungsroman from Goethe to Santayana* [1], a novel of the bildungsroman genre is to introduce an orphaned or semi-orphaned child, who struggles by departing the remainder of his family and embarking on a journey, the outcome of which is the gaining of maturity through moral education (57). *Redburn* is basically about the protagonist; Wellingborough Redburn, a twenty five year old young man, who decides to travel upon the death of his father.

The aim of this article is to examine whether Redburn emancipates from childhood to adulthood through a voyage that he embarks upon from New York to Liverpool for that basic purpose. Marina Wagener and Susanne Krogull state in their article "Educating World Citizens" [2] that travelling is an eye opening experience as every society contributes to the overall image of a global comprehensive perspective. Therefore, Redburn is eager to gain that kind of knowledge and to do so, he decides on going to Liverpool in particular following the steps of his late father. This voyage becomes a challenging

experience to embark upon as his father was a merchant, who died shortly after bankruptcy. So it becomes the responsibility of Redburn to compensate for the family's financial loss and to somehow fit in his father's shoes.

DISCUSSION

As the story unfolds, it becomes evident that Redburn is both troubled and burdened by the loss of his father, whom he is highly influenced by. He used to constantly look up to his father to the extent that he was desirous of becoming another version of him. So as his father becomes more sophisticated after visiting Liverpool, Redburn decides to travel to Liverpool on his first voyage in the sophisticated world to gain a similar eye opening experience. But Heather Rowan-Kenyon *et al.* [3] argue that in order for one to grasp the potential benefits of traveling, he is to accept the idea of exposure in the first place by adequate preparation for the trip. The only preparation Redburn does is that he takes along a guidebook about Liverpool that belonged to his father some thirty years back. Nonetheless, he decides on going through the same experience of exposure by crossing the Atlantic as a sailor on board the *Highlander* as he says that [4]:

As years passed on, the continual dwelling upon foreign associations, bred in me a vogue prophetic thought, that I was fated, one day or other, to be a great voyager: and that just as my father used to entertain strange gentlemen over their wine after dinner, I would hereafter be telling my own adventures to an eager auditory. And I have no doubt that this pre-sentiment had something to do with bringing about subsequent roivings [sic] (7).

Redburn bids his family farewell without looking back as he is looking forward to this experience, which would not only expose him to the world; but would also grant him a valuable experience of relating once more with the image of his father by going to the same city and visiting the same locations. But Jonathan L. Hall argues in "Every Man of Them Almost was a Volume of Voyages: *Writing the Self in Melville's Redburn*" [5], that it takes Redburn sometime to realize that the illustrious heritage of a "son-of-a-gentleman" is entirely powerless on board the *Highlander* (2). Therefore, in spite the fact that he tries to adopt an aristocratic atmosphere in his behavior on board the ship in relation to the same image of his father, he discovers that he could not at least from the beginning measure up to that image; as his father was a merchant, whereas he is still just a boy.

It is natural for Redburn to behave in such a manner as this is his first exposure to the outer world. He attempts to learn by rapidly trying to understand the terminology of the sailors. He tries to be useful on the ship through following the instructions of the ship-mate, yet he is still not a sailor since he does not really belong. As soon as he sets foot on board the ship, this experience of traveling for Redburn becomes an adventure that would offer him knowledge of the world. But he views himself as superior to the other sailors as he does not accept them as they are. Here, a conflict between his expectations and reality prevents him from benefiting fully from this voyage.

As a result, he is considered by the others as an outsider, who does not really belong. Out of his lack of experience, he wants things to be executed in his own way as he regularly wants his acquaintances to be aware that he comes from a higher social class. He psychologically refuses the idea of integrating with the others, which will inevitably prevent him from learning about other patters of behaviors and attitudes adopted by the other sailors. He believes that offering other sailors some tobacco placed in his father's box would immediately win them over and that calling on Captain Riga in a refined manner would make him favored throughout the voyage. Contrary

to his expectations, Redburn gets severely rejected, even mocked, in both situations as his attitude is improper and affected.

Redburn recognizes that he would be leading a regular life in New York, so he decides on traveling to gain experience. In *A Reader's Guide to Herman Melville* [6], James E. Miller, Jr. states that *Redburn* is a novel that shows the impact of the world on the innocence of a boy (55). But as Redburn fails to reach out to the others and as his encounter with the others is met with scorn on board the ship; he becomes disappointed and troubled. This, in its turn, leads him to become alienated from the others and even ridiculed as he is tenacious of such an inadequate behavior.

Both he and the sailors come to resent each other despite the fact that he is aware that being in such a situation would hinder his reception of knowledge and experience. He takes things personally, adopting a childish approach and a critical stance, which would only aggravate the whole matter. For instance, he expresses himself by commenting:

I loathed, detested and hated them with all that was left of my busting heart and soul and I thought myself the most forlorn and miserable wretch that ever breathed. May I never be a man, thought I, if to be a boy is to be such a wretch. And I wailed and wept and my heart cracked within me, but all the time I defied them through my teeth and dared them to do their worst (52).

This resentment of the others probably also affects Redburn physically as he is constantly suffering from sea-sickness. He starts soothing himself by thinking that this nightmare of treating him like a slave especially being bossed around by vulgar and brutal men would end upon reaching Liverpool. But even this idea does not remain steadfast in his mind because when he passes by Ireland, he becomes disappointed by finding nothing extraordinary about it. Here he starts to doubt this entire voyage by thinking that it might have been better for him to have remained in New York.

Evidently, all of this is very reductive in the sense that Redburn is not willing to see anything positive in the voyage up to this stage. In this respect, Leon Howard says in his book *Herman Melville* [7] that Redburn's emotions are genuine, profound and pervasive as they reflect the simplicity of a boy's involvement in such a condition (16). This may be why Redburn starts to view the voyage as a means to an end, which is reaching Liverpool. But Newton Arvin in his book entitled *Herman Melville* [8] says that the whole story is basically about

the initiation of Redburn's innocence into the evil of the world (103).

Redburn treasures the guidebook about Liverpool that belonged to his father as he not only carries it around with him, but also frequently refers to it. Lawrance Thompson states in *Melville's Quarrel with God* [9] that this guidebook becomes heavily associated with the Bible for Redburn since both become inseparable (84). Based on his reading of the guidebook, Redburn starts to form a very pleasant impression about Liverpool. However, upon reaching the city his impression changes as he says:

Looking shoreward, I beheld lofty ranges of dingy warehouses, which seemed very deficient in the elements of the marvelous; and bore a most unexpected resemblance to the ware-houses along South-street in New York. There was nothing strange; nothing extraordinary about them. There they stood; a row of calm and collected ware-houses; very good and substantial edifices, doubtless, admirably adapted to the ends had in view by the builders; put plain, matter-of-fact ware-houses, nevertheless and that was all that could be said of them. To be sure, I did not expect that every house in Liverpool must be a Leaning Tower of Pisa, or a Strasbourg Cathedral; but yet, these edifices I must confess, were a sad and bitter disappointment to me (127).

The first glimpse that Redburn gets of Liverpool is that of the warehouses, which are evidently ordinary. The whole scene is not what he had in mind. Consequently, he is disappointed since all of the waiting period at sea on board the *Highlander* to reach Liverpool and all that Redburn had to tolerate and to go through was basically worthless as reality did not measure up to his anticipation. He is in for a setback as he does not find what his father's guidebook says about Liverpool to be accurate after all.

In that regard, he comes to comprehend a couple of unpleasant facts. The first is that there is a great difference between idealism, the drawn image of Liverpool in his mind and the actual reality of the city. Then he starts to understand that being a sailor does not allow one enough exposure to the city itself since he is required to remain on deck in order to perform his job till nighttime, after which sightseeing becomes not so permissible. He, nonetheless, tries to seize the opportunity to set himself free on the very first day of his arrival at Liverpool by going to an English inn, where he asks for tea after supper as this practice is typically English. But, to his surprise, he is told that it is too late for tea and, therefore,

is offered a cup of "swipes" instead, which he finds to be a miserable beverage as he describes it to be "a bastard kind of beer, or the washings and rinsings [sic] of old beer-barrels" (134). In this respect, it seems that everything was going the wrong way.

It is obvious here that Redburn desires to emancipate, to mature, to grow; and that is why he was reading his father's guidebook in the first place. He tries to visit the places highlighted in that guidebook, but he soon comes to realize that that guidebook is rather outdated and actually useless. Here, he is subjected to another setback.

In other words, Redburn is attempting to relive his father's experience. He is trying to memorize certain facts as the count of the population of Liverpool and its map in order to facilitate that task. But what he does not know, is that this is not the kind of knowledge that would pave the way for his maturity. He later says:

It never occurred to my boyish thoughts, that though a guide-book, fifty years old, might have done good service in its day, yet it would prove but a miserable cicerone to a modern. I little imagined that the Liverpool my father saw, was another Liverpool from that to which I, his son Wellingborough was sailing. No; these things never obtruded; so accustomed had I been to associate my old morocco guide-book with the town it described, that the bare thought of there being any discrepancy, never entered my mind (152).

It is indicative here that Redburn is a dreamy and sentimental young man, attempting to relive his father's experience. He wears funny cloths that everyone eyes suspiciously attempting to resemble his father and he keeps his father's guidebook with him as a means of a continuous emotional bond that would connect him with his late father. But as a matter of fact, he rather fails to update himself by being assertive and practical. To illustrate, he is impressed by regular sailors, who traveled "hither and thither", but who do not really add to his own experience of exposures as he is introduced to the stories of these miserable commoners only through hearsay, which makes all of this not really worth the hardships and miseries that he goes through. He seems to be misplaced as even his kindness and good intention toward others is frequently interpreted in the wrong sense.

Moreover, he is referred to as "Jack" by those commoners that he meets in the streets indicating that he is basically just another young, ignorant and common sailor who is embarking on his very first voyage.

His character lacks a lot of exposure and is not yet ready for the experience of knowledge gained through traveling and that is why Captain Riga expects him to run away somewhere in Liverpool and to never come back. It seems that the people around him are more aware of life than him. For example, upon encountering a dying woman with her two little girls and baby, Redburn panics for he does not know what to do. He tries to bring them food but no one is willing to help. He eventually finds a loaf of bread and throws it to them, but they are too weak to the extent that they could not even chew. Well, Redburn does not stop here, he tries to hospitalize the mother, but even she refuses to cooperate with him as she thinks that that would prolong her suffering. Even though these wretched people are aware that death will finally deliver them from their misery, Redburn fails to see that due to his ignorance and superficiality.

Eventually, Redburn is hit by reality by recognizing that poverty, sickness, and beggary do strongly exist in Liverpool. This exposure only adds to his exasperation, at the time that it should also educate him by broadening his horizons. He, in fact, remains shallow and, therefore, is exploited by even those who ought to be the closest to him; like Harry Bolton. In this regard, Joyce Sparer Adler points out in *War in Melville's Imagination* [10] that this relationship between man and man reflects Melville's vision of the world of his age, which runs like a transcontinental river through his work (1). To illustrate, Harry takes Redburn to London without telling him for what purpose exactly. He deceives him by saying that he will be showing him around, but it turns out that he is really exploiting him. Redburn proves here that he is so naïve as he forgives Harry and remains very close to him at the time that Harry becomes very discreet and withdrawn from him.

Despite the episodes of misery and frustration, Redburn still attempts to gain knowledge and experience. But there is not a single person to be sought for that objective. This is why Redburn is carried away by a mere, worthless beggar just because he heard a few lines of a ballad somewhere. In other words, these desperate attempts of grasping knowledge are pathetic indeed. He states that:

During my evening strolls in the wealthier quarters, I was subjected to a continual mortification. It was the humiliating fact, wholly unforeseen by me, that upon the whole and barring the poverty and beggary, Liverpool, away from the docks, was very much such a place as New

York. There were the same sort of streets pretty much; the same rows of houses with stone steps; the same kind of sidewalks and curbs; and the same elbowing heartless-looking crowd as ever (202).

This shows that it is not really the place or the city that educates one, it is rather how a person perceives any given experience whether in New York, Liverpool, or any other place; and what makes this even worse is that Redburn does not realize this simple fact of life. In addition, Redburn just lacks the adequate attitude in embarking on a new experience. For instance, he intends to visit the news-room while walking one evening in the city. He simply goes in without any self-introduction or even permission. Consequently, he is dragged, humiliated and thrown out for being taken as an intruder. Here, once more Redburn and not anyone else, is to be blamed.

Furthermore, he decided one day on going to the fields and hedges of England only to find a frightful announcement nailed against an old tree, which reads as follows: "Man-traps and spring-guns!" (210) indicating that he is rejected even by nature, which views him as an intruder. In another example, he attempts at attending a sermon at church only to find himself in the same awkward situation of being unwelcomed as he is eyed by everyone there due to his funny looking cloths. This adds to his consciousness for he says: "I then walked toward Liverpool, full of sad thoughts concerning the cold charities of the world and the infamous reception given to helpless young travelers, in broken-down shooting jackets" (213).

Toward the end of the story, on board the *Highlander* in its rout back to New York, Redburn encounters several incidents of deaths, diseases, plagues, and famine. As a result, Redburn, like all of the other sailors, suffers immensely without anything to eat at all. These sailors start to eat leftovers as a need of survival. They are lowered to the level of animals as a little girl seeing them describes them to her mother as mere pigs. This is a statement of how Redburn's condition is deteriorating in the story; but the final blow is when Captain Riga refuses to pay him even a minimal wage claiming that Redburn actually owes the Captain for taking him on board the ship in the first place! Merlin Bowen in *The Long Encounter: Self and Experience in the Writings of Herman Melville* [11], says that evil is not only evident in most of the story, but also toward the very end of it (63).

CONCLUSION

Even though *Redburn* is a story about a young man who travels to gain knowledge and experience of the world, which is typical of a bildungsroman novel, the comprehensive examination of the novel as a whole shows that *Redburn* deviates from that categorization. Redburn does not gain any worthy experience of exposure. He simply does not learn anything new as he is placed in an underprivileged environment that is engulfed with various sorrows and miseries due to poverty. He actually fails to learn from this challenging experience. As a result, the whole purpose of traveling, which is gaining knowledge of the world, is not attained at all in the case of Redburn due to his tenaciousness of his childishness and superficial speculations.

The feelings that are developed in Redburn's psyche are those of frustration, disappointment, and misery; and these impressions do not help him emancipate to the world of adulthood. He had personal and psychological high expectations about the world before conducting the voyage, but after doing so; he recognizes that the world does not receive him with open arms. This realization may have served Redburn in his path toward maturity had he used this knowledge in, at least, knowing how to deal with others in a later stage of his voyage. But time and again, he fails to have the upper hand in any situation, turning him into a "victim" of some sort due to his typical ignorance and naivety. Consequently, *Redburn* is not a typical bildungsroman novel in which the protagonist reaches a kind of emotional, psychological, or mental growth.

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