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Keywords

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Andersen's Fairy Tales and the Bildungsroman

Joseph Torres

Though they appear to be simple children's stories, every reader of Hans Christian Andersen knows just how detailed and impactful his fairy tales are. The Danish writer, born in 1805, writes with an intricacy that effectively creates stories about growth and childhood. He has written several children's short stories collections, many of which were inspired by folktales Andersen had heard as a child. "Thumbelina" (1835), for example, though it was inspired by "Tom Thumb," was Andersen's own creation. The Danish reception towards his stories, however, was mixed, with some critics remarking that children's stories should educate rather than merely entertain. In response, Andersen wrote one of his most well-known stories: "The Little Mermaid" (1837). Like "Thumbelina," "The Little Mermaid" was inspired by a folktale, specifically the 1811 story "Undine." However, "The Little Mermaid" is creatively Andersen's own. This fairy tale is what resonated with international audiences and established Andersen's reputation as a talented fairy tale writer. Finally, it wasn't until 1843 that "The Ugly Duckling" was published in yet another collection by the author. Over time, Andersen's stories have been translated into over 120 languages, and have become classics of English-language literature, going on to influence many authors and inspire various adaptations, such as Walt Disney's very own *The Little Mermaid*.

Andersen's story structures are reminiscent of Johann Wolfgang

von Goethe's writing, more specifically his novel *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, which created the literary genre of the Bildungsroman. Goethe's novel focuses on growth and education in the protagonist's formative years, which Andersen implements in his writing. Furthermore, both Goethe and Andersen's readers can learn from the protagonist's struggles in maturation, making each Andersen story an excellent educational device for children facing the struggles of adolescence.

Critical attention on Andersen and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* has centered on their relation to the Bildungsroman genre. Petru Golban argues that,

The Bildungsroman creates complex portrayals of individuals and not symbols or ideals, not social or moral types... in realism... the round and dynamic protagonist... is an individual subject with feelings, thoughts, memories, dreams, a whole of a consciousness in progress, growth, and, above all, capable of change. (113)

Golban writes that the Bildungsroman flourished in the Victorian era and suggests that the Bildungsroman is a realistic genre. However, Tammy Amiel Houser makes it clear that the Bildungsroman functions in many stories and not just realistic novels: "In contrast to the romantic fairy tales that have been associated with the female Bildungsroman, which model the heroine's weakness and the fantasy of a rescuing prince, "The Ugly Duckling" provides an alternative context concentrating on individual growth and strength" (550). Houser goes on to write about how Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* subtly nods to Andersen's fairy tale and its elements of Bildungsroman. However, she does not outright say that these fairy tales of Andersen's

are indeed Bildungsroman in their own right. Comparison between Goethe's work *Wilhelm Meister* and Andersen's fairy tales is a topic few scholars have touched on, with the only exception and connecting string being the brief mention of the Bildungsroman.

How does the literary genre of Bildungsroman work in a children's fairy tale? Does it work at all, and if so, is it effective in relaying the themes of maturity and growth? Andersen's children's stories such as "The Little Mermaid," "Thumbelina," and "The Ugly Duckling" effectively encapsulate the working themes of the Bildungsroman, such as growth, childhood, and responsibility. However, while I concede that Golban's comments on the significance of the Bildungsroman in the realism genre are correct, I insist that the Bildungsroman flourishes in many modes, not just realism. The relationship that flourishes between the Bildungsroman and fairy tales is unique and clear, essentially stripping down the Bildungsroman to its bare essentials.

Understanding the Bildungsroman's Structures and Themes

To understand the way Bildungsroman operates in a fairy tale, an understanding of the genre is necessary. The Oxford English Dictionary defines Bildungsroman as "A novel that has as its main theme the formative years or spiritual education of one person" ("Bildungsroman"). The Dictionary goes on to state the etymology of the word, breaking it down into two pieces: *bildung*, deriving from German and meaning "education," and *roman*, deriving from multiple languages—including Danish—and meaning "novel." Therefore, the core understanding of the Bildungsroman is that the stories written in this genre center around the education of its protagonist.

The kind of education that the protagonists of these novels undergo is usually vast, covering the physical, mental, and spiritual sides of the character. Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* is an excellent model for observing the Bildungsroman in action, as it also educates the reader in turn:

In *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* we saw a form of learning and emotional growth grounded in a body that finally resisted regimentation... But the question remained as to how readers might themselves be involved in such a process of growth...one of [the novel's] achievements is to demonstrate that it takes a visceral engagement to break our habits and that it is through the body that we transform how we live our relation to ourselves and indeed to others. (Morgan 358-359)

The story starts with a protagonist who is portrayed as young and naive. For Goethe's novel, that is Wilhelm Meister. This person must choose between a business lifestyle and an artist's lifestyle, and being the naive boy he is, he chooses the latter. However, Wilhelm grows distracted by a newfound love for Marianne, an actor who sees Wilhelm in addition to another lover who is rich and older. When Wilhelm finds Marianne with her lover, he feels crushed, and so retreats back to his father's plan, which is to become a businessman. Wilhelm's actions after his encounter with Marianne reflect his depressed state of mind and desperation to find purpose. Wilhelm going back to his father is a retreat because he witnessed the harsher realities of the world and grew fearful. This instance of Wilhelm falling back to an earlier lifestyle is an example of Carl Jung's idea of "Regressive Restoration of the Persona." This idea encapsulates the phenomenon of an individual who undergoes a crisis and retreats to a previous way of living. As Jung writes, "Formerly perhaps he wanted more than he could accomplish; now he does

not even dare to attempt what he has it in him to do” (164). Regressing, or retreating to a past state, does not work because one cannot live out a previous identity that is fundamentally different from one’s current situation. For example, Wilhelm’s new knowledge is that love and theatre life are not what he thought they would be, but the earlier Wilhelm was ambitious about theatre life and didn’t know the reality of it. Therefore, Wilhelm’s attempt to return to a previous self is futile, resulting in his breakdown in front of Werner, his close friend.

Oftentimes when people are far from living an ideal life, there are a few things that can get them back on track. *Wilhelm Meister* shows a few of them, namely love, adventure, and responsibility. Wilhelm’s love for Marianne is fresh when it is broken, and the break is what wakes him up to reality. However, his reaction is to retreat, which is not exactly ideal. What brings him out of this depressive state is finding adventure and gaining a sense of responsibility. Wilhelm finds responsibility in Mignon after finding her when she was beaten and then adopting her. Through this sense of responsibility, Wilhelm finds a sense of purpose that is outside of himself. Furthermore, in Wilhelm’s previous state of regression, finding a reason to be useful is the answer to his question of what good he is on earth. The journey to self-knowledge and knowledge of others is why it is necessary for Wilhelm to leave his home, as he acknowledges: “From youth, I have been accustomed to direct the eyes of my spirit inwards rather than outwards; and hence it is very natural that to a certain extent I should be acquainted with man, while of men I have not the smallest knowledge” (Goethe 150). What separates this journey with the theatre from his first attempt with

Marianne is the responsibility he carries for Mignon and his newfound knowledge of young love.

After Wilhelm returns to the business world, he meets his friend Werner. While Wilhelm is poor, happy, attractive, and healthy, his friend Werner, who did not undergo this emotional journey, is rich but unattractive, depressed, and sickly. Because of the education Wilhelm received through his endeavors, he has found meaning and purpose in his life. This discovery occurs because Wilhelm leaves home to find himself, eventually becoming educated by the harshness of reality, and comes back to his previous community not in search of his previous life, but to come back to a family to provide them with the knowledge he has learned. This circular journey is a common theme in the Bildungsroman: leaving home, pursuing education away from home, and returning home. In completing the full circle, one completes the crossing between childhood and adulthood.

Categorizing novels within the Bildungsroman genre still remains a difficult task. Golban discusses the Bildungsroman in history and how it grew in popularity because of its realism. A key aspect to note is that while Bildungsroman succeeded because of its application to realist novels, it does not solely operate in realism. In fact, limiting the label of Bildungsroman to very specific novels, as Aleksandar Stević writes, is problematic in understanding the genre: “a category with well-defined borders but limited membership is not very useful” (163). Stević continues to point out the unique structural quality in Goethe’s story that acts as a literary map for non-German writers: “the Bildungsroman is not merely a novel about individual development, but a novel about individual development within a world that

is caught up in the process of social transformation” (169). *Wilhelm Meister* has this quality, since it confronts what it means to grow up in a changing world.

Understanding Andersen’s Fairy Tales

The Bildungsroman is clearly evident in Goethe’s story, and in identifying the patterns in *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, readers start to find these structures elsewhere, such as in Andersen’s fairy tales. One of Andersen’s stories that has the clearest example of Bildungsroman is “The Little Mermaid.” This story centers around a nameless mermaid at the age of fifteen. Once a mermaid or merman turns fifteen, he or she is allowed to swim up and observe the surface. However, after some time, he or she “longed to be at home again; and after a month had passed they said that after all it was far prettier down at the bottom, and there one was so comfortable at home” (*Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories* 4). At the surface, all of the mermaids experience something like a more vivid reality and reject it, eventually going back to their home, which is less painful and intimidating; each one of them initially has an interest in the surface world, yet they quickly grow weary of it. However, the youngest mermaid is the only sister to keep her fascination with the surface world because of a newfound captivation with a prince. Through this encounter with a prince, she grows more inclined to learn about humans in general, and she learns that humans have souls that can continue living in the afterlife. She desires to live forever like humans do, and seeks out ways to obtain an everlasting soul by consulting the sea witch, who tells her that she can get a soul if the prince loves

her and only her. The price for the witch to give the little mermaid legs is her tongue, or her ability to speak, and in addition to being mute she will be in constant pain since the feet she will soon have will not be accustomed to walking on the ground. Lastly, if she fails to get the prince, she will die. Regardless of such conditions, the little mermaid agrees.

The little mermaid does not succeed, and the prince falls in love with someone else, later getting married to her. However, at the prince's reception, the little mermaid starts to accept her fate and continues to dance: "all was joy and merriment aboard the ship till long past midnight. She laughed and danced with the thought of death in her heart" (*Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories* 13). Even when the sisters of the little mermaid propose to her that she kill the prince so she can return to the ocean—ultimately giving up on the pursuit of a soul—she refuses. In this surrender, she triumphs over suffering. With arms spread out she falls overboard, accepting that she will perish. As she disintegrates into the seafoam, air spirits appear and give the little mermaid a new purpose: to travel the world as an air spirit and help humans as an angel-like figure. Even though she does not obtain a soul, her rebirth reveals to her a clear path to earning one. As the little mermaid lifted her "bright arms towards God's sun, for the first time she felt the gift of tears" (15). In her death, she is finally able to feel and understand like a human.

The Bildungsroman reveals itself in "The Little Mermaid" by bringing an understanding of both physical and spiritual growth to both the protagonist and the readers; when individuals make the crossing from childhood to adulthood—which is symbolized in the story by the water and

the surface—they will find hardships like they had not before, much like the little mermaid felt pain in order to receive legs. In addition, the little mermaid was able to overcome her pain and find an altruistic purpose for herself, achieving a full identity. Andersen's other female protagonists seem to have similar growth patterns in terms of their character development. For example, the Danish author's work "Thumbelina" is a story centered around a miniature girl who grows emotionally and mentally rather than physically. "Thumbelina" starts with a woman wanting to have a child, so she goes to a witch for advice. This witch tells the woman to plant a special seed, and when she does, a little girl sprouts out of the flower, growing to the height of a thumb.

Eventually, Thumbelina leaves home and begins to travel. During those travels, she finds a white butterfly and befriends it, tying it to the water lily so that they may travel together and sail faster as well. However, the miniature girl is picked up by a beetle-like bug, and Thumbelina is described as "sorry for the beautiful white butterfly which she had fastened to the leaf, for if he could not free himself he would die of hunger" (*Hans Andersen's Fairy Tales* 83). This butterfly—appropriately a white butterfly, symbolizing purity and innocence—is Thumbelina's first encounter with her actions as negatively impacting those she knows. There is now a realization of responsibility towards others around her, which is something she will come to understand.

After the summer passes, Thumbelina ends up living with a mouse for quite some time, eventually meeting their neighbor, a rich, yet blind, mole. This mole shows them the body of a swallow in its tunnels, saying

that it must have frozen to death. As the mouse and the mole leave the swallow, Thumbelina goes back to pay her respects to the bird, eventually learning that the bird is not dead, but simply injured and frozen. While she fears that taking care of the swallow will anger the mole and the mouse, she takes courage and commits to caring for the bird, becoming the first instance where Thumbelina stands up for herself. Up to this point, she has been a passive character, and in this act of selflessness she grows exponentially. After the winter passes and the swallow recovers, he asks Thumbelina if she would like to follow him to where he flies, where the weather is perfect all year round. She accepts the second time he asks and rides the bird as he flies to a beautiful country. She ends up meeting a little prince who gives Thumbelina the title of “queen over all the flowers” and grants her the ability to fly (*Hans Andersen's Fairy Tales* 99). Her new ability to fly is an analogy for the experience of living a virtuous life, for in living according to a moral code and practicing this code, there lies true happiness. The Bildungsroman is understood in this story through Thumbelina's search for purpose and responsibility, which she eventually finds; Thumbelina searches for responsibility throughout the story, and only after taking care of someone is she able to understand her purpose: motherly devotion. Just like in reality, where all people are born from mothers, yet only other women have the potential to become mothers themselves, Thumbelina—being born from a flower—completes her character arc of mother of the flowers by receiving a feminine version of self-transcendence.

Thumbelina is able to find a community. This aspect of character development seems to be a large theme for Andersen. It is evident in “The

Little Mermaid,” who wants to belong to the human community, and, especially in “The Ugly Duckling” as well, for all the ugly duckling desires is to belong. The story of the ugly duckling is one of turmoil, and though the ugly duckling will eventually find peace and belonging, he must first persevere through quite a bit of suffering. Before the winter sets in near the end of the story, the ugly duckling spots a flock of swans. He experiences a connection with these swans from a distance, and longs to fly away with them to warmer lands. However, he cannot, because he cannot fly like them. The ability to fly relates back to Thumbelina, when she receives her wings at the end of the tale; because she lived a life of virtuous purpose, she gained true happiness. However, the duckling has not lived his life and faced the hardships of winter, which is a necessary skill to learn since all people and animals must learn to survive through the winter. It’s only until this cold season has passed when the duckling feels a change: “Then the young bird felt that his wings were strong, as he flapped them against his sides and rose high into the air” (*Hans Andersen's Fairy Tales* 48). He finally finds the swans he had seen before, and after being ridiculed all of his life, he commits to letting the swans murder him. However, just as he bows his head in defeat, he sees his own reflection and finds that he has been a swan this whole time, and that he is fully grown and beautiful. The now-realized swan also finds that the swans around him did not have the intention of murdering him, but instead were attempting to befriend him. He then goes and enjoys all that the garden he resides in has to offer, playing with the children and living with his new family. In the end, the ugly duckling’s dream that he would one day belong becomes realized in the presence of his new family

as he metamorphosizes into who he was meant to be: a beautiful swan. In terms of the Bildungsroman, it is necessary for the characters to find a place to belong because it aids in the protagonist's attainment of their identity. In the story of "The Ugly Duckling," it is found after suffering through hardships. From the beginning of the story, the ugly duckling never belonged anywhere he went, and it's only through the ridicule of others and the harshness of nature that he is able to grow up and both metaphorically and literally "swim with the adults."

The Relationship Between the Mythical and the Bildungsroman

All three of these Andersen stories offer the theme of education and growth that is the hallmark of the Bildungsroman. The little mermaid desires the love of the prince, eventually growing past it; Thumbelina finds growth in the task of responsibility; and through the ugly duckling's adventures, he is able to mature. The journeys the protagonists take are reflective of the archetype of "The Hero's Journey," a concept created by Carl Jung. Archetypes are common characters or plot patterns that appear in literature often enough that their tropes seem familiar. For example, the archetype of "The Hero's Journey" deals with an individual who faces the hardships of reality in the journey he or she takes in order to fulfill his goal. After conquering said hardships, the hero returns home, as seen in *Wilhelm Meister*. All three Andersen stories mentioned offer this archetype, but simply in different fashions. The little mermaid has her journey to the surface, and in returning to the sea as sea foam, she completes her cycle of growth. Thumbelina leaves the flower she was born in to eventually become queen of the

flowers, and the ugly duckling has to leave his first family before he can come back to a new one. Readers will find that they are familiar with many of the archetypes present in stories, and because of their familiarity they find an aided understanding of the larger plot of the novel. In terms of the Bildungsroman, many archetypes may appear within this genre, but it is their formulaic use that creates a unique atmosphere of growth and education amongst its readers.

Conclusion

Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales create unique worlds with captivating atmospheres, but they also overlap with other popular genres and themes, such as the Bildungsroman. The structure of this genre is credited to Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. Emotional aspects of the genre—including love, adventure, and responsibility—as well as psychological aspects—distress in the midst of physical change, archetypes, and “Regressive Restoration of the Persona”—all work together to build the Bildungsroman structure. In addition, observing Andersen's stories independently from one another may still reveal similar structural choices: “The Little Mermaid's” readers may find that in loving a human and orienting herself to helping others, the little mermaid finds purpose; “The Ugly Duckling's” readers may see that in persevering and growing up, the duckling finds a community; and “Thumbelina's” readers may find that in finding and assuming responsibility, Thumbelina finds her identity. The hardships the protagonists in these stories experience are all for the sake of growth and self-knowledge. These fairy tales of Andersen work with ancient

archetypal ideas about growth and responsibility that transcend the pages he writes. And with an understanding of the Bildungsroman that Hans Christian Andersen's stories contain, readers can become educated in their growth from child to adult.

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