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Adventure Time and the Bildungsroman

Empirical Thesis

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Introduction

Adventure Time is an animated situational comedy show produced by Cartoon Network. It officially released on April 5 2010. Originally the project of Pendleton Ward, the show is now produced in America, with a significant amount of the animation done in Korea (Goldstein). Its episodes run ten minutes each, and at the time of writing 231 episodes had been aired. The show deviates from similar sitcoms such as *The Simpsons*, which is listed by Ward as a source of inspiration (Ohennessian), in that time actually passes in the show; characters grow older as the show progresses. Finn, the presumably only human left in the world, is the protagonist. He has aged four years since the start of the show, from twelve to sixteen years of age. He experiences personal growth, and several formative situations occur. The show is critically acclaimed, earning numerous awards. It is one of Cartoon Network's most successful shows (Feeney), and has sparked a line of toys, games, and other spin-off products. When reading this thesis, it is somewhat important to keep an open mind. Some if not all examples will seem nonsensical. However, they make sense in the context of the particular episode or the show as a whole, which cannot always be fully shown in this paper. In the world of Ooo, where *Adventure Time* takes place,



Fig. 1: the Candy Kingdom (Intro)

everything, including lifeless things, has a potential for sentient, intelligent life, with all the consequences thereof. For instance, the Candy Kingdom is wholly populated by sentient candy (fig.1). Some beings may have strange needs or properties, but the show presents them as natural, and so will they be treated in this thesis.

This thesis will argue that *Adventure Time* shows a remarkable similarity to the Bildungsroman, although it takes a postmodernist approach. The Bildungsroman has been described by Susanne Howe: [the hero] “sets out on his way through the world, meets with reverses usually due to his own temperament, falls in with various guides and counsellors, makes many false starts in choosing his friends, his wife, and his life work, and finally adjusts himself in some way to the demands of his time and environment” (4). Jerome Buckley emphasises the role of romantic relationships. He puts forth that the hero needs two romantic encounters, one “debasing” and one “exalting” (17). These elements all feature in *Adventure Time*. Given the popularity of the show, it is interesting to study as it is a modern

work aimed at children, yet it follows classic literary conventions. This thesis will focus on the first five seasons of *AT*¹. In addition, theory on the Bildungsroman will be used.

Academically, *Adventure Time* has thus far mainly been of interest to the field of Gender Studies, due to the inclusion of gender fluid characters and the emphasis on everyone's right to be themselves (Jane 231). The tropes that do not pertain to gender have not been documented thus far, at least in an academic context. The show does not limit itself to the character development of its central hero. Rather all major characters have definable arcs. For conciseness' sake, this thesis will be limited to Finn's development.

The first chapter will demarcate the Bildungsroman, synthesising ideas from the abovementioned authors as well as others. The following chapter will deal with the notion of the guides and counsellors. The third chapter will examine Finn's romantic development. Chapter four discusses the adjustment of Finn to fit in with his environment.

¹ The seasons aired on the following dates; season 1: March 11 2010; season 2: October 11 2010; season 3: July 11 2011; season 4: April 2 2012; season 5: November 12 2012

Chapter 1: Defining the Genre of Bildungsroman

To be able to compare *Adventure Time* to the Bildungsroman, it must first be established what the Bildungsroman is. This chapter will review the most important theories on the subject. The sources used below were found in the entry on Bildungsromane by Joseph R. Slaughter for the Wiley-Blackwell *Encyclopaedia of Literature*, as well as in an analysis for *Literature Compass* by Tobias Boes. These two authors have endeavoured to present a complete overview of the genre, and a synthesis of the two gives a complete and critical overview.

The term Bildungsroman was first officially introduced in the English language in 1910, via the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (OED), although the term was popularised in Germany by Wilhelm Dilthey in his 1870 biography of Schleiermacher (Boes). In the German Bildungsroman, the hero is rebellious in a society which does not allow for it and must adjust to lead a productive and fulfilling life. Since Dilthey, the term has come to describe any story which focuses on character development (Slaughter). This may be due to what Susanne Howe calls “English preference for vagueness”; while in the English literary world all novels of formation are Bildungsromane, in the German tradition there are multiple categories for different variants on the theme. In her 1930 book Howe notes a number of elements the English Bildungsroman generally adheres to: the hero “sets out on his way through the world, meets with reverses usually due to his own temperament, falls in with various guides and counsellors, makes many false starts in choosing his friends, his wife, and his life work, and finally adjusts himself in some way to the demands of his time and environment” (4). Slaughter criticises this definition for being “mundane”. However, from an academic point of view it is concise and workable. Howe uses masculine pronouns, but of course there are also female-led Bildungsromane. Elaine Baruch mentions that many earlier novels, such as *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* focus on the role of marriage in the development of the heroine (335). Nowadays, the genre has been appropriated by feminist writers to include character arcs of “delayed self-discovery” (Slaughter). In *Adventure Time*, characters male, female and gender fluid all have their respective development. However, Finn is featured most heavily and will therefore be the focus of this thesis. Furthermore, the gender-neutral pronoun “them” will be used when talking about the conceptual hero.

Buckley firmly marks non-German novels as Bildungsromane. He notes that in the Anglo-Irish tradition the hero is often frustrated by inadequate schooling and an antagonistic father (17). The hero leaves home to find himself, usually going to the big city. Here he does

not only work on his education per se; the hero is involved in at least two love affairs: “one debasing, one exalting, and [which] demand that in this respect and others the hero reappraise his values” (17). Buckley concludes that while no two Bildungsromane are exactly alike, certain elements are always present: a troubled childhood, a conflict between generations, the disparity between the country and the city, self-education, romantic affairs and the search for meaning and work ethic. His and Howe’s definitions differ: while they share the idea of choosing one’s company and having to leave home, they appear to differ on the importance they attach to the romantic relationships and the city-country dichotomy. Buckley’s theory has been criticised: his analysis, which was published in 1974, excludes women, as noted by Marianne Hirsch and Elizabeth Langland in 1983. Furthermore, Jeffrey Sammons regards Buckley’s definition as “arrogantly provincial” (Boes). Sammons is generally unsatisfied with the Bildungsroman as a modern genre, claiming it was an exclusively German Romantic affair. That is unhelpful at best, and most critics accept that the Bildungsroman is a genre nowadays. There exists an extensive modern discourse on the Bildungsroman by such scholars as Joshua Esty, Marc Redfield, and Franco Moretti (Boes). Buckley’s focus in the difference between city and country is too specific for a more general definition. Although it somewhat works for *Adventure Time*, on those grounds it is excluded from the synthesis. Furthermore, this thesis recognizes that people of all genders may be protagonists, and *Adventure Time* indeed has many strong female characters, with their own character arcs. Despite this shortcoming in Buckley’s theory, it is still a good definition. Any author using it should take the gender politics at play into consideration, however.

Howe and Buckley have been selected as the main sources because of their prevalence in the overviews examined for this paper. They also make attempts to give a comprehensive list of elements of the Bildungsroman, which suits the purpose of this thesis well. Criticisms of their theories are taken into account here by synthesising the two, as well as acknowledging their respective shortcomings. Combining the elements they mention, the framework for the Bildungsroman could be summed up thus: the hero does not fit in society for a variety of reasons. They fall in with a number of guides and councillors. The people they accept into their life are not always conducive to their development, however. The hero enters in at least two romantic relationships; one or more will embarrass them, and will leave them unsatisfied. These relationships will, however, be formative. The final relationship exalts the hero: it signifies a completion of their Bildung. The hero must make adjustments to their character in order to function in society. These three elements will be discussed in the following chapters.

Chapter 2: Guides

On his many adventures Finn encounters as many guides, people telling him what to do and how to do it. According to Suzanne Howe, a critical element of *Bildung* is that the hero does not undertake his journey alone, but is assisted and guided (4). Finn has trouble finding direction in life and generally has trouble dealing with trauma, which can be seen in, for instance, “The Vault” (5.34)². Here Finn locks away memories with which he cannot deal, which later come back to haunt him. A character like Finn, with a penchant for getting into trouble, is much in need of guidance. Buckley mentions that “self-education (18)” is critical for the hero. Finn does not learn well from direct sources. Rather, he follows examples and arrives at his own conclusions, influenced by teachers. This chapter will examine how the different guides he encounters contribute to his journey, and which lessons he takes away from them. The way Finn uses these lessons to fit his environment better will be discussed in a later chapter.

Finn’s most important guide is arguably Jake, Finn’s adoptive brother, best friend, roommate, and talking dog. He both helps Finn and leads him astray. He is a good friend but an unreliable guide; his lazy nature gets in the way of imparting morality and wisdom. His usual advice is not to worry and to take it easy. Important to note is the age difference: whereas Finn is a young adolescent, Jake acts like he is in his late twenties (McDonnel 84) somewhat like a cool “Bill Murray”. This gives him a position of fraternal



Fig. 2: Finn pilots the Jake Suit

guardianship, and a natural authority. A good example of Jake’s lessons can be seen in “Jake Suit” (5.27). In this episode, Jake shapeshifts into a powerful suit worn by Finn (fig. 2), who thinks himself invincible wearing it. Jake, however, has to deal with the physical pain caused by all Finn’s antics. Upon Jake’s protestations, Jake gets to pilot Finn for a while, to prove it is not easy to be worn as a suit. Jake shrinks and melds his being with Finn’s, thereby gaining control over his movements. Jake does not try to convince Finn the suit is a bad idea through

² The numbers between parentheses denote the following: (a:b), with a colon, is the timestamp in a specific episode, where “a” stands for the minute and “b” for the seconds. (x.y) shows the number of season and the episode within that season, where “x” stands for the season and “y” for the episode.

moral reasoning, but rather by tormenting Finn, for example by embarrassing him in front of his girlfriend's family (fig. 3) (6:45). As a result, Finn learns nothing: as soon as Jake concedes the point, Finn gleefully jumps in the Jake suit and subsequently into a pool of lava. Jake's advice is not all bad, however. In "Puhoy" (5.16), he tries in vain to



Fig. 3 Finn is made to act embarrassing in front of Flame Princess' parents.

convince Finn to face his feelings and not let them "fester," which is good advice. In Jake we have a friend as well as a guide, and while he is absolutely good at being the former, his teachings are somewhat lacklustre. All in all, Jake is a guide of dubious quality; he sometimes imparts wisdom, sometimes folly, and in both cases Finn sometimes listens and sometimes not. Because they are siblings, there is a certain rivalry, which can be seen in "Jake Suit". Uncharacteristic for a helper, Jake is constantly featured in Finn's life; he does not leave after sharing his wisdom. There does not appear to be consensus in the academical world on whether a Bildungsroman guide can be a mix of good and bad; however, Jake is too big an influence on Finn's life to not mention him. It could be argued that his role is in accordance with Howe's theory: she notes that the hero has trouble finding his friends. Due to Jake's multiple roles in Finn's life, he commands the respect of a friend, has the attitude of a flatmate, yet he tries to teach Finn things as well. This makes him a troublesome teacher, but a teacher nevertheless.

Princess Bubblegum (PB) is Finn's main patron, first love interest and guide. She is an autocratic despot, mainly interested in science and statecraft. Thus, she mostly imparts unto Finn the importance of a rational, scientific way of thinking. Although Finn greatly respects her, this approach is often lost on him. However, when PB urges Finn to learn, he does take away a lesson; just not always the intended one. Thus PB is a catalyst for Finn's Bildung, if not a teacher. This is in accordance with the theory: Buckley mentions the need for self-education (18). A good example of this is "Slumber Party Panic" (1.01). Here Finn has to royally promise not to reveal the secret of a zombie outbreak, as the resulting stress would be fatal for the inhabitants of the Candy Kingdom³. After he breaks the royal promise, a cataclysmic series of events take place; time stops, and giants threaten to kill him as a

³ According to lore, the people made of candy living under the rule of PB in the Candy Kingdom explode when they are under stress.

punishment, unless he solves a math equation. When asked if he learned his lesson, he says yes: incredible and cool things happen. On another occasion, in “Burning Low” (4.22) she interferes in the relationship of Finn and Flame Princess, both to defend Finn and because of scientific reasons of incompatibility. Flame Princess is too powerful, and if she were to

become emotional, due to kissing, she could heat up so dramatically as to burn through to the earth’s core. She tries to teach Finn about the dangers of the situation using science (fig. 4) (4:31); this, understandably, does not work. Eventually Finn understands the situation, but only after he experienced the problem first hand. In “Dungeon” (1.18), PB orders Finn and Jake to secure a dangerous dungeon. Instead, Finn decides to enter, while Jake stays outside. Finn finds out that “two heads are better than one” after encountering many challenges that have been easily solved, if only Jake had been with him. Eventually the pair are reunited in the



Fig. 4: Finn and Jake are not engaged by the lesson



Fig. 5: “Yer darn right I am”

dungeon, but things go awry and PB has to save Finn and Jake from certain death by Eyeball lasers, a monster residing in the dungeon. Afterwards, she sternly asks them what they have learned (fig. 5). The value of cooperation is not what she means, however:

“PB: I hope you learned a lesson from all this!

F&J: (confusedly and giggling) uh, working together... better... two heads are... than not working together?

J: (sniggers) huh, whatever.

PB: [growls]

J: [whispers to F] it looks like that’s not the answer she wanted!

F: (worried) uh, I learned that you are a very, uh, intelligent princess?

PB: [cowboy voice] you’re darn right I am” (10:30).

This shows the impact of Princess Bubblegum on Finn’s Bildung: she constantly urges Finn to learn, and so he does. She helps him achieve his self-education, which is stressed by Buckley, while she is still the guide described by Howe.

BMO is a special case in *Adventure Time*. They are an animate games console who lives with Finn and Jake, being an entertainment system as well as a kind of flatmate. Their role is to impart more nuanced thinking to Finn. Due to them not having a fixed gender, BMO imparts a unique, unbiased view on the world. Sometimes relentlessly positive, at other times easily saddened and confused, BMO is a hectic and confused character. Finn and Jake often function as guardians for BMO, but the season five episode “Be More” suggests that BMO was actually created to take care of Finn: the gang finds BMO’s

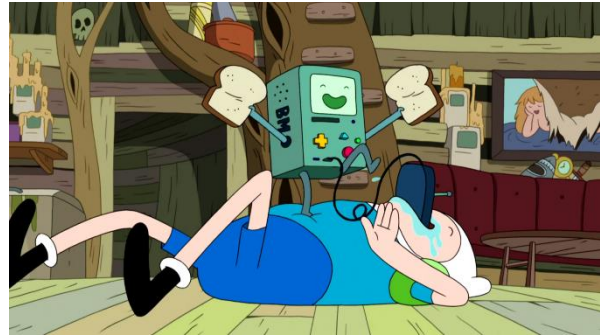


Fig. 6: BMO entertains Finn in Jake’s absence



Fig. 7: BMO’s insides

maker, who explains that BMO’s purpose was to take care of his own son. Since he never had children, he sent BMO into the world to find “someone else’s little boy to take care of (9:35)”. When Jake leaves the house to become a father, it is BMO who keeps Finn relatively sane and safe (fig. 6) (10:17). As a matter of course, Finn does not always listen to the council he is given. In “Card Wars”, BMO expressly warns Finn against playing competitive games with Jake, as he is far too emotionally invested in these games to be able to take a loss (1:24). Finn ignores the advice, to his peril. However, getting into an argument teaches him how to pick his fights, and to make the best of an awkward situation. All in all, despite their diminutive stature and often silly side-adventures, BMO is important. A literal inside look reveals that BMO wears a princess’ crown on their battery and a beating heart (McDonnell 162), which goes to show there is more than meets the eye when it comes to this little games console that could (Fig. 7) (9:23). BMO is a true friend to Finn, and is often protective. They truly have a sense of child-like wonder, but act mature when Finn needs it.

Finn has a number of other teachers and guides which are not mentioned here. The above are the most significant, actively teaching forces in Finn’s life. They all want to help Finn, although the effectiveness of their teaching varies. This is not yet observed by theoreticians; in general, the guides and friends are either good or bad, and there is a focus on self-education. The guides in Finn’s life often serve as catalysts for his education, allowing him to find out more about himself. *AT* plays around with the specific roles characters have,

with the effect that they defy easy classification. However, the characters mentioned above all help him complete his Bildung in an active way, and can therefore be classified as guides.

Chapter 3: Romance

Jerome Buckley noted the need for the hero to come to romantic maturity (17). He sees a common trend in Bildungsromane such as *Sons and Lovers* and *The Red and Black*: heroes have at least two romantic liaisons: one brings the hero down; the other brings him or her to a new understanding. Finn is no stranger to being in love. Three of his relationships are especially significant when discussing his development in romantic relationships. He is in love with princess Bubblegum for a long time, which only translates to an actual relationship for a painfully short period; he dates Flame Princess for a considerable amount of time; and then there is the curious case of Finn's lifetime-length marriage in the episode "Puhoy" (5.16). The first two end in bitter disappointment. The latter, however, sees Finn come to full maturity, make wise and brave decisions, and brings him happiness to the end of one of his lives.

From the onset of the show, Princess Bubblegum fills the role of patron as well as love interest. Finn shows clear affection for her: for instance, he is jealous of her attention when Ricardio is attempting to woo her in the episode "Ricardio the Heart Guy" (1.7). She believes a romantic relationship is impossible because of age and species difference: she is an adult, and made of gum, while Finn is a human child. She believes that he must grow out of his pining for her, but his devotion suits her too well to reject him altogether (McDonnell 110). Everything changes when after life-saving surgery PB is brought back quite a bit younger, due to a shortage of reconstruction bubble gum. She is now

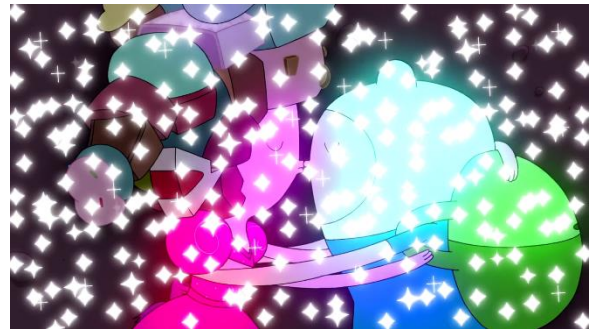


Fig. 8. Young Princess Bubblegum and Finn share a kiss in "Too Young" (9:10)

thirteen. In "Too Young" (3.05), she and Finn have a short-lived romantic relationship (fig. 8). It comes to an end abruptly with the advent of the earl of Lemongrab: a lemon-based lifeform created by PB, who has come to claim the kingdom now that she is too young to rule. This forces her to age her body artificially back to the age of 18, to prevent the despotic rule of the insane and inept Lemongrab. After the change, Finn tries to find out whether the two of them can still have a relationship, but PB explains that their relationship was, in fact, five years ago and he needs to move on. In the following episodes, Finn tries to rekindle the

relationship on different occasions. He meets with failure every time, however. His feelings are betrayed in the (in)famous episode “What Was Missing,”⁴ where his most prized possession is revealed to be a lock of PB’s hair. He reaches a low point in “Incendium” (3.26). After his advances are rejected yet again, Finn is struck down with lovesickness. Jake believes the only remedy is finding him a new girlfriend, a plan that will eventually bring together Finn and Flame Princess. PB leaves a lasting impression on Finn, however; even though he becomes involved with someone else, his thoughts go out to her often, as can be seen in “Burning Low,” “The Suitor” and “Too Old.” All in all, the relationship with PB is unhealthy for Finn. However, it is formative; he learns about jealousy, loyalty and, perhaps most importantly, how to give up on impossibilities.

In “Incendium,” Finn meets Flame Princess, who is indeed made of fire. Their first encounter makes an impression of Finn: she attempts to destroy his house in a fit of anger, and Finn defeats her by pure luck. As she storms off, Finn is cured of his lovesickness regarding PB, and develops a crush on Flame Princess. In the following episode “Hot to the Touch” (4.01), Finn tries to find her to declare his love. This does not go well. He completely misjudges the signals she sends him: when she sets fire to the floor to show affection, Finn stomps them out, hurting her. When she then tries to kill them with fire, Finn tentatively says the he likes her fireballs. When Finn is exasperated with their incompatibility, he starts to cry, causing Flame Princess to think Finn is a water elemental, her total opposite: it is clear to her that them being together is physically impossible. Finn is not so easily dissuaded, however:



Fig. 9. Finn and Flame Princess give the relationship a chance in “Hot to the Touch”

“FP: Finn, even if we like each other, we are going to hurt each other.

F: No, we don’t have to! I can take it! I mean, can’t we try?

FP: You would defy nature for me?

F: Uh, yeah... whatevs... (fig. 9) (9:56)”.

⁴ The episode suggested a same-sex relationship between Princess Bubblegum and Marceline. This was confirmed by the Olivia Olson, voice actress for Marceline (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZV223FM19Y>), although the voice of Princess Bubblegum, Hynden Walch, explains it as purely friendly (McDonnell 111).

This dialogue sums up why their relationship will not work: they are opposites, even to the point where physical interaction causes harm to them. In a way, this is the same mistake Finn made when he was involved with Princess Bubblegum: he refuses to acknowledge obvious incompatibilities. Thus the problem lies within Finn: he must grow out of simple crushes, and “reappraise his values” (Buckley 17). Finn must find out what are truly important character traits in a partner. To do so he must first experience bad ones, like FP’s destructive nature and fiery temperament. Their relationship is ended in “Frost and Fire” (5.30). Within the context of Finn’s development with regard to his sexuality and romantic relationships, this is the most

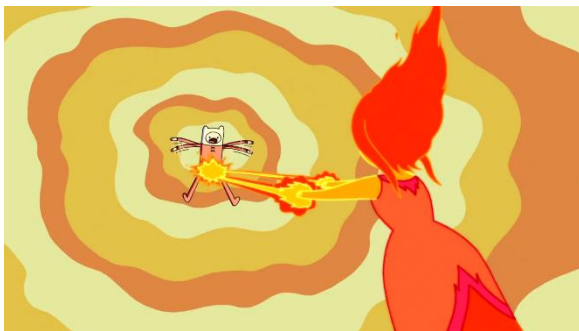


Fig. 10: Finn’s first dream

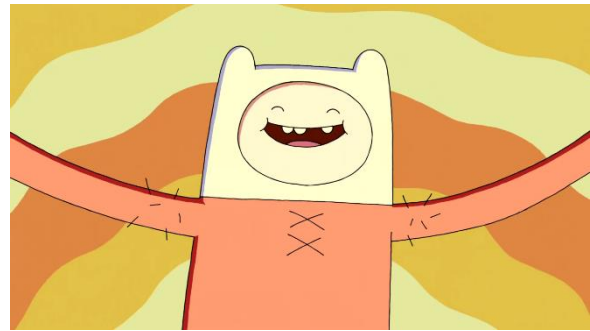


Fig. 11

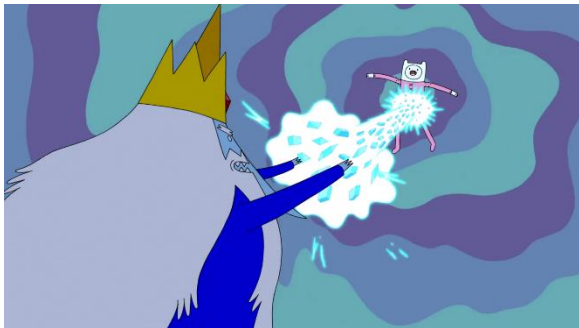


Fig. 12: Ice King features in Finn’s second dream



Fig. 13: Finn as an ugly baby in the final dream

significant episode. After watching Flame Princess beat up the Ice King for ruining their date, Finn has a strange dream: he is engulfed in the flames of Flame Princess, but it feels good to him (fig. 10 & 11) (1:35). The flames are focussed on his groin, making the sexual connotation obvious. When Finn makes Flame Princess and the Ice King fight again to bring back the dream, it backfires; Ice King wins the confrontation. This time the Ice King is the one focussing the energy beam on Finn, which feels horrible (fig. 12) (5:35). The dream is also visited by the Cosmic Owl. In the *Adventure Time* universe, the appearance of the Owl signifies a prophetic dream (McDonnell 114). However, the dream never finished. To see the end, Finn makes the adversaries fight again, and after a great struggle Flame Princess is

victorious. In the ensuing dream, Flame Princess is terrifying. She sets Finn aflame, but this time it turns Finn into a moustachioed baby, capable only of speaking gibberish (fig.13) (8:57). Flame Princess turns away from him, disgusted, and the Cosmic Owl tells Finn that he “blew it” (9:02). After Finn confesses to Flame Princess that he was arranging the fights, Flame Princess ends the relationship. “Frost and Fire” is the culmination of this troubled relationship. It shows that as soon as Finn experiences a sexual awakening, his incompatibility with his girlfriend can no longer be worked around. This is the debasing relationship mentioned by Buckley: Finn makes a fool of himself and is humiliated. Over the course of the relationship, much material damage has been done, and much physical pain has been endured. Nevertheless, this romance helps Finn in his *Bildung*: in “The Red Throne” (5.47), he meets FP again after the breakup. He explains to her that in the aftermath of the relationship he has been “trying to improve himself (4.26)” (fig. 14). This is in a feeble attempt to get back together with her, but it does show how she has made a lasting impression.



Fig. 14: “No funny stuff”, says FP when Finn touches her shoulder

The two relationships described above ended in tears, In “Puhoy,” Finn travels to a strange land where everything and everyone is made of pillows and linen. He ends up here to escape from his own broodings; he is worried about Flame Princess not laughing about a joke he made. He crawls deep into a magical pillow fort constructed by Jake, to “fester” (1:08). This leads him to the Narnia-esque place of the Pillow World. The doorway disappears behind him as soon as he enters the world. He soon becomes a hero of the local village by slaying a Blanket Dragon, and dances with the Mayor’s daughter, Roselinen, at the party in his honour. She asks Finn to dance, and even flirts with him:

“F: Where I’m from, blankets and pillows are used for bedding.

R: (chuckles) well, they’re used for that here too.

F: (blushes and laughs nervously)” (4:25).

The next time Finn is shown, he is a fully grown man. He lives with Roselinen, and has two children (fig. 15) (5:40). However, he still wants to find the entrance to his old world, which he now remembers poorly. After a long search he finds an oracle, who asks whether he really wants to leave now, when he has a family and is happy. Finn unthinkingly answers in the affirmative, but after talking to Roselinen, he decides to stay. The next scene shows Finn on



Fig. 15: Finn with his pillow family



Fig. 16: Finn on his deathbed in the pillow world

his deathbed, surrounded by his family (fig. 16) (9:44). As he dies, he emerges from the pillow fort, young again. This episode shows what Finn's life would be if he manages to find a suitable partner. He reaches old age with a loving family around him, content with his lot in life. When he leaves the Pillow World, this life seems to him like a dream. He tries to tell Jake, but he is interrupted by Flame Princess calling to tell she now gets his joke and finds it funny. After the interruption, Finn somehow forgets the Pillow World. Thus, there is no lasting effect of this experience. It is poignant, however, to see how he reaches maturity in his healthy relationship with Roselinen, and completes his development in one fell swoop. At the time of the relationship with Flame Princess, Finn is immature, and chooses to run away. The theme of marriage being a main catalyst of development and learning has been noted to be critical in Bildungsromane with a female protagonist (Baruch 335). When marriage is the only active influence in the life of the female protagonist it is problematic, but here, it is a contributing factor. Finn decides to stay with his family, despite having the possibility of reaching his lifetime goal of returning home. All this being reversed at the end of the episode suggests Finn is not yet ready; he has yet to complete his mistakes and development before he can experience fulfilment. This is a somewhat postmodernist approach to the Bildungsroman; *Adventure Time*, to a certain extent, defies some of the characteristics of the Bildungsroman, but does show them. This is a result of the free-spirited ideology behind *AT*.

In “Puhoy” Finn completes his Bildung, only to have it be forgotten in the end. In his relationships it can be seen that Finn makes the mistakes he has to make to finally come to emotional maturity. He needed to find out that compatibility is the deciding factor, and the blind adoration for Princess Bubblegum or the passion against all reason for Flame Princess were not sufficient to maintain a stable relationship. Roselinen shows that Finn is capable of completing his development; it will, however, take some time.

Chapter 4: Adjustment

This chapter will explore what adjustments Finn makes to better suit his environment. The hero undergoes their personal formation for a reason: they do not fit in. *Adventure Time* plays around with Finn's adjustments, as they are sometimes reversed at the end of the episode. This reflects the importance of self-actualization; one does not need to change altogether to fit the environment, but may very well make an effort to be happier in the society. These lessons often have to do with his calling, his mission in life, which is mentioned by both Howe and Buckley. Every adjustment, whether it is reversed or not, teaches Finn something about himself which he can then use to better himself.

Due to Finn's ever helpful nature, he is sometimes confronted with conflicting interests. The episode referred to here is "Memories of Boom Boom Mountain" (1.10). Finn attempts to placate a crying mountain, who is upset that the nearby village is "rough-housing," or play-fighting, all the time. Every solution Finn comes up with gives rise to new issues, or even exacerbates the existing problems. For instance, tying farmyard animals to the fists of the villagers (fig. 17) (4:05) makes the violence they inflict on one another less impactful. However the noise is only the worse for it. When Finn wants to turn the mountain around so that it does not have to face the village anymore, the mountain behind it complains to Finn of robbing her of the view of the first mountain's splendid backside (fig. 18) (7:45). It is impossible to find a solution for everyone's problem that does not in turn cause a new problem. In the



Fig. 17: farmyard animals tied to the fists of the villagers



Fig. 18: the mountain behind protests against turning the front mountain around



Fig. 19: everyone is happy

episode, Finn is haunted by visions of his own infancy; he recalls Joshua and Margaret, Jake's parents, taking pity on him, a lonely baby covered in "boom-boom". He wants to mirror that behaviour and help all those around him. Finn is quickly overwhelmed, as the requests for help pile on: scratching the buttocks of a dragon, helping to pollinate a plant, warming up a sentient ice cube who is feeling cold, and so on. Ultimately, he finds that he cannot refuse to help people: that would betray the helpfulness that Joshua and Margaret showed him. However, he also cannot help everyone personally, as no solution he comes up with is wholly satisfactory. Finn cunningly designs a Rube Goldberg machine (fig. 19) (10:30), where all help one another in a convoluted but eventually successful way. Finn noticed that his original *modus operandi* of trying to find individual solutions to everyone's problems was not working, so he changed his way of thinking to accommodate the new situation. Thus Finn's character develops. He does the same in "City of Thieves" (1.13), and "Daddy's Little Monster" (4.06), where he adapts to his surroundings to tackle the problems he is confronted with.

Finn's character changes are not always for the better, however. In "Davey" (5.07), Finn has to make a drastic adjustment to his life to maintain both his mental and physical health. His heroic exploits make him so well-known as to make him a celebrity. People fight for his attention. He decides to leave the world of heroism behind and take on the guise of Davey Johnson (fig. 20) (2:45): a middle-aged man who works in a broom shop. Taking on this alter ego gives him a new perspective on life: he can be seen strolling around the Candy Kingdom just taking in the sights, unperturbed. Finn embraces his new life with a worrying intensity. He insists that Jake call him Davey as well, despite him being in on the plan. He changes his voice, builds a new home for himself, and seemingly forgets his true name and calling. Jake is none too pleased about this, and devises a plan to bring his friend to his senses. Posing as a robber, he tries to force Finn to become a hero again to defend the local population. However, like a responsible citizen, Finn calls the police, who arrest Jake. This behaviour clashes with



Fig. 20: Finn changes himself into Davey



Fig. 21: Davey's new job

Finn's character seen thus far: his normal way is to take action himself. In other words, he over-adjusts by changing his nature. In a dialogue with his alter ego, personified by his false moustache (fig. 22) (8:25), Finn reflects on his desire for the simple life, without having to act himself all the time. However,

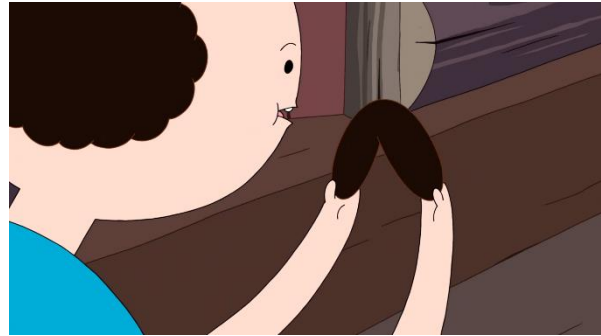


Fig. 22: dialogue between Finn and Davey

his heroic tendencies gain the upper hand, and he helps Jake escape from prison. This episode shows Finn going through a crisis of character, which causes him to make an adjustment. However, it does not agree with his nature, and the adjustment is reversed.

To conclude, Finn undertakes a number of adjustments of varying effectiveness. As a rule, the more drastic the change, the less likely it is to have a positive outcome. *Adventure Time* shows that the hero can adapt to his environment, but may not change altogether. Small adjustments lead to success: a different approach to the original goal, like in “Memories of Boom Boom Mountain” and “City of Thieves,” can have satisfactory results. All in all, Finn fits in with the Bildungsroman theory: he repeatedly makes the adjustments necessary to be a successful individual in society. The show places emphasis on being true to the self, which causes him to sometimes feel the need to undo his adjustment.

Conclusion

Finn's life adheres to the archetypical *Bildungsheld*, which was established in chapter one. The cast of colourful characters that surround him serve the purpose of many of the elements found in the *Bildungsroman*. Many people try to guide and help him on his way to maturity; his romances are agonisingly confusing, yet he enters a blissful marriage, only to have it be a strange dream of sorts. He tries to adjust to his surroundings, sometimes going against his very essence in doing so. In *Adventure Time*, many such stories can be seen: stories of coming of age, of becoming a parent, of love gained and lost. Turbulent issues of self-image and the child-like wonder with which one may regard a world open for exploration and adventure, are all featured on the show. Here only a smidgen of the potential has been tapped; a multitude of likewise potent stories are still largely unexamined. For instance, one may discuss the different parent-child or creator-creation relationships. Take, for instance, the stories of Neptir, the Earl of Lemongrab, and Finn's relationship with his biological father. Furthermore, the show is interesting for scholars occupied with gender studies, as the show features alleged same-sex relationships as well as a gender-fluid character in the form of BMO. Also worth consideration is the philosophical ideas used in *AT*. For instance, in "The Real You" Friedrich Nietzsche and nihilism are featured, and Nicolas Michaud notes many other philosophical influences (294).

This thesis was subject to some constraints. For conciseness' sake it was focussed on the first five seasons, but it should be noted that later seasons are likewise interesting. Furthermore, with regards to the theoretical background, only a limited number of definitions were used, as well as criticisms on those theories. This thesis was built on the research already done by Slaughter and Boes, and any follow-up research might take into account more scholarly sources in order to come to a perhaps more nuanced conclusion. As with every critical analysis, this paper reflects one person's interpretation, while countless more exist.

Adventure Time highlights the potential of children's television. It goes beyond the merely diverting or simply educational: it shows to its viewers the possibilities that sentience offers, in a world where even candy and rocks have a life and emotions of their own. Thus, it shows how individuals may develop themselves, no matter what their background or, indeed, their substance is. It preaches mindfulness of one's surroundings, and a respectful attitude towards the experiences of others. Through the coming of age, indeed the *Bildung*, of Finn, it

is shown that it is acceptable to fail, to want to run away from problems for a short period of time, and that romantic relationships are confusing for all parties involved. *Adventure Time* offers a postmodernist approach to the Bildungsroman; it shows its characteristics, but freely plays with them. It is a wonderfully interesting children's cartoon, with many themes as of yet unexplored by scholars.

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