

Harold Fry's Self-Redemption in *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*

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Abstract

Pressed by his wife and the atmosphere of his wife, Harold started his on-foot journey to go to see a friend, which gave himself a chance to have a look back upon himself, upon the relationship between his son and him, between his wife and him. The more he looked back and the more people he met in his journey, the more he thought about himself and the more faults he found about himself; and the more he got to know about friendship, love and responsibility. In this way, he achieved his redemption in three levels: cognition, behaviour and spirit. Cognitively, he achieved the identification of being a husband not to lead an estranged a life with his wife; a man to get in touch with old friends and society and a father to do a lot for son. Such a cognitive redemption was demonstrated through his change in behaviour from passivity to volunteering in the pilgrim, in the team activity, in the brave recalling of his growing-up and past. Based on such change, he realized his spiritual redemption: a fresh look at himself and the society: No one is to live in the shadow of the past but to reconcile with it for a normal and peaceful live as the life destination.

Keywords

Pilgrim, Journey, Redemption

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1. Introduction

According to *New York Times*, *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry* "is not just a book about lost love. It is about all the wonderful everyday things Harold discovers through the mere process of putting one foot in front of the other. It is very much a story of present-day courage. Joyce writes about how easily a mousy, domesticated man can get lost and how joyously he can be re-found" [1].

The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry tells about a story of a retired elderly man travelling a long journey to visit his dying friend. At first, he was just about to give his friend, Queenie, kind of a hope but ultimately he achieved his own self-redemption through reaffirmation in self-worth through a new cognition of his growth defects and understanding and acceptance of his destiny. Meanwhile, his wife, Maureen, in

the process of waiting and concern of Harold, looked back on the painful past and triggered a new understanding of love, family and a renewed understanding of herself.

Harold's self-redemption can be divided into three levels: cognition, behavior and spirit.

2. Attempt: Self-Redemption in Cognition

2.1. The Superficiality of Self-Redemption

One day as the sun rose as normal, Harold received a letter from Queenie, an old friend long out of touch, and this broke his quiet and dull life. Retired from work without any friends,

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plus the suffering of the pain of the departure of his son, Harold had scarcely any passion with his wife Maureen. Nor was she able to overcome the emotional barrier of the son's suicide, turning the resentment onto her husband. They quarreled more and more. The unexpected arrival of Queenie's letter practically "gave them an opportunity to reflect upon themselves and think about the problems they were facing" [2]. In the process, they recalled on their past and learn to confront the regrets in their lives bravely.

However, it is so clear that the self-redemption of Harold was superficial at the beginning. At first, Harold's just intended to answer a letter. His attitude towards Queenie was complicated, and felt it rather difficult to find the words. Even if he could, it was hardly appropriate to write some words to someone he had been out of contact for twenty years. Soon he gave up worrying about expressing anything beautifully. On the other hand, he felt "sorry for Queenie's situation and shamed by the inadequacy of his words" [3]. He was afraid of returning home as life would be exactly the same except for Queenie dying in Berwick. With the excuse of posting the "letter", he fled his home and the reality.

When he met with the garage girl and talked about the question of faith, an idea came up to him that he must do something for Queenie. The girl inspired him that if you have faith, you can do anything. Trust what you don't know and go for it, and believe you can make a difference. These words reminded Harold that he "had never come across such simple certainty" [4], and then he made a decision to go to Berwick on foot. Hearing of the girl's story, he found a way in his mind to show his faith by walking. What is faith? Faith is a belief in "what you cannot see or prove or touch" [5]. When he put this idea into practice, he began to have his self-redemption in cognition. However, he was not aware of this at the very beginning. When Harold set out from the petrol station, he had completed a part of self-redemption, which was superficial at that time.

2.2. Knowing Himself Through Recalling

Reading the letter from Queenie for farewell, Harold had mixed feelings as all the past scenes appeared in his mind. He became aware of his own problems, acknowledging that he was the worst father in the world who did nothing in his life. He hoped to encourage Queenie to live long by going on hiking more than 1,000 kilometers, accidentally bringing himself a chance of self-redemption.

In the hiking, he recalled a lot and achieved part of his self-redemption. The first step is to find himself. This part of Harold's self-redemption can be divided into two parts. One part is carried out during his walk, and the other is carried out during his memory. Through tracing the past bit by bit, the

memory uncovers the truth of the matter, which help Harold to "face up to his heart and find himself" [6].

2.3. Lack of Understanding Between Father and Son

David, the only child of Harold who was not fully ready to be a father attended the University of Cambridge but turned out to be a tragedy.

When David was drowning, Harold stopped to unlace his shoes, because he was afraid of taking responsibility for the failure of rescue, resulting in Maureen's resentment. When David was about to graduate, he invited his parents to attend his graduation ceremony. Though specially prepared, the couple still missed the ceremony as they just waited at a wrong place. Quite unhappy, the child did not take them on a canoe tour of Cambridge as promised earlier. When he found David addicted to alcohol and drugs, Harold did not have a face to face talk with him but secretly threw away the tools by himself. David got hurt and committed suicide.

Harold's behavior was quite "beyond the social acceptance" [7]. This can only be found in his own family and his growing up. When he was young, he was mute because of his family and his own personality. He was indecisive, obscure and lacked confidence. When he got married, he was hesitant and did not express his love to his wife and his care for his child David, letting go the very precious opportunities for communication between them over and over again.

"Harold had spent his whole life bowing his head to avoid confrontation, and yet, spilled from his own flesh was someone determined to hold his eye and have it out with him" [8].

Thus, a follower Wilf could easily give him a sense of familiarity David or whom he would prefer some compensation.

3. Resistance: Self-Redemption in Behavior

3.1. Passivity in Self-Redemption

Compared with the self-redemption in cognition, Harold's self-redemption in behavior was more significant. He gradually found out his problems and wanted to make up. But he didn't know how to and where to. Therefore his journey was no longer pure, direct, but full of disputes. His journey was not directed by himself, but was affected by those pilgrims. His self-redemption became passive. He felt a long way from the place he began, but also felt a long way from where he would be going, until one of the famed leaders ended the disputes on the grounds of Harold's old age and bad moods.

The leader organized a so-called first team to visit Queenie near the destination. His main goal was news headlines in the media that he could fight for his son's custody after the divorce. The pilgrim team finally fell apart.

Deserted by the team, he went the wrong into the wrong way several times and wasted a lot of time. He began to doubt himself and one day finally could not help calling Maureen that he could not hold on any walk any more, and that he was wrong. Maureen assured him that he was close to the destination. Harold resisted. Under this condition, it was impossible for him to introspect. However, the passivity of his self-redemption in behavior was still helpful to him in that it could affect his self-redemption in heart. In this way, his final conversion would be more important.

3.2. Defects of Harold's Childhood Growth

The deepest part of Harold's self-redemption is "the recognition of the defects of his past growth" [9]. When giving his birth, Harold's mother was not ready to be a mother and ran away from home at his childhood. His father attributed his wife's departure to the son's birth. He got drunk every day, and took many strange "aunts" home in the presence of Harold. Obviously, Harold's parents were totally absent in his childhood education. The lack of family responsibilities passed on to Harold. In a whole, he was an abandoned boy, although this boy also ever fell in love, got married, worked and gave birth to a child. Queenie's letter is an attempt by the author to initiate Harold's self-redemption, and we see that it was because of this letter that Harold, who used to numb himself, began to "awake and realize his responsibility" [10].

4. Success: Self-Redemption in Spirit

4.1. Completion of Harold's Self-Redemption

At the end of his journey, Harold achieved his self-redemption. From the beginning of self-redemption in cognition to the end of self-redemption in spirit, Harold had changed himself totally. He was "no longer ducked out of the questions and he had the courage to face them" [11]. He finally understood that he could forgive his parents for not wanting him, for not showing and teaching him how to love, or even how to express love in words. All he wanted was his child. That was his self-redemption concerning himself and his son.

Arriving in Berwick, Harold suddenly had a feeling of being lost and confused. "He knew an end was coming, but had no idea how it would be, or what he would do afterwards" [12]. He remembered those who had helped him, and those who did not have people to love, including himself. He recalled Maureen would still sleep alone in her own room, and her life

was still plain. Painful memories were still lingering in his life. Maureen refused to forgive him. Of course, he was indeed the one who should be forgiven. He did not have the courage to get into the sanatorium. Later, when he finally had the courage to ring the sanatorium door, he saw Queenie who had a huge tumor on her neck. She could no longer have a surgical resection and all of her body was skinny bones. He gave Queenie all the presents he had collected for her on his way and greeted her. Queenie was unable to speak, but left a trail of tears. She left the world very quietly.

Although Harold's journey finally didn't save Queenie's life from death, Harold used an 87-day journey to make up his regret to Queenie. After David's death, Harold was so grievous that he dismantled the garden shed and broke into the brewery and did something terrible. Queenie knew all about David, so she knew it had to be Harold, and she took the blame. Queenie was fired on the spot and then she disappeared. Harold acknowledged that he walked not because of the romance between them. The reason was that he let her go and let her take the blame, but he never said thank you. She saved him. That was part of Harold's self-redemption between him and Queenie.

At the seaside of Berwickshire, after seeing Queenie, Harold and Maureen finally started their first conversation in 20 years. Maureen decided to forgive Harold, and they decided to go back to Kingsbridge. They both remembered what happened at their first meeting, as if Harold told Maureen a joke and then they laughed like kids. Maureen finally laughed too. They said goodbye to Queenie and once again realized that life could disappear so thoroughly. Harold was rescued at last and that was the end of his self-redemption between him and Maureen.

4.2. Harold's Final Conversion

"He had believed that when he saw her he could say thank you and even goodbye. That there would be a meeting of a kind, and that somehow it would absolve the terrible mistakes of the past. But there could not be a meeting, or even a goodbye, because the woman he had once known had already left" [13]. It was due to a sense of powerlessness that the hope in his heart which he always insisted on was brutally shattered by reality. A violent surge of grief forced its way through him. He was fragile and vulnerable, which had resulted from his misjudgment of emotions, but now he was back to the original point of awakening.

Harold remembered the cry of Maureen when David was sent to the funeral parlor, and the three things that accompanied David's departure: a red rose, a teddy bear, and a pillow. He remembered that from then on they began to complain about each other and slowly started behaving like strangers at home, until one day Maureen moved his blanket to another bedroom. During that time he started to drink alcohol, and then the

stupid thing that Queenie took the blame for him happened.

“The waves kept throwing themselves further and further up the shoreline, all that energy, all that power, crossing oceans, carrying ships and liners, and ending just a short distance from her feet, in a last flume of spray”. Harold was like the waves. He tried hard, but everything was not as sure as he had believed. The things that Harold reflected on had already happened in the beginning, so he could not change anything. If there was anything different, then it was not the end of the matter. It is the way we see the world, accepting the facts that have taken place with peace of mind, and not being entangled with the pain and guilt brought about by fate. Don't let something that happened before destroy the lives of yourself and others. Cherish and accept people around you, and love them. All along the way, Harold felt guilty and reproached himself for what he had not done. Finally, he discovered that the root cause of all the pain of today was precisely the pain and regret of the past and he refused to let go.

“To have come all this way and discovered what it was you wanted, only to know that you must lose it again” [14]. He did not know what would follow from Berwick-upon-Tweed, but he was ready for that.

4.3. Maureen's Renewed Understanding of Love

The journey was not only Harold's path toward self-redemption but also Maureen's. The formation of a tragedy is often caused by many factors.

When informed of Harold's departure, Maureen seemed a bit caught off guard. To her, Harold was an integral part of her life. After David passed away, Harold became a negligible part or even partial conflict to her. However, when the person who was gradually estranged from her suddenly disappeared from her side, she was shocked, angry and even scared by the loss. Therefore, she could only follow the instructions of Harold's letter and waited for him to go home. As a result, while Harold crossed the whole of England with his weakened body, Maureen's spiritual journey also straddled most of her life.

If David was a victim of Harold's growth flaws, Maureen was also a victim. The serious absence of a father's role was the indirect cause of David's suicide, while Maureen was witnessing the entire process of alienation between the father and son. She attributed David's death to Harold's misconduct. After her son died, she took care of her son's room daily, talking to the non-existent son, and turned a blind eye to the real Harold. She thought she had lost her son, lost everything, and the rest of her life was just meaningless. However, during those days of Harold's journey, she truly felt the importance of Harold to her life. As a result, she focused on Harold's movements in various ways and even went so far as to see the

psychiatrist. “The reason she had stayed with Harold all these years was not David. It wasn't even because she felt sorry for her husband. She had stayed because, however lonely she was with Harold, the world without him would be even more desolate” [15]. Harold's leaving really made Maureen feel the terror of losing her husband. She had a new comprehension of their love and affection, and realized how she needed an emotional self-redemption.

While Maureen was waiting for Harold's return, her memories were also presented in a flashback. In the days of Harold's walking, she not only worried about Harold, but also deepened her longing for her son David. As a result, she kept recalling the past between Harold and David, again and again. Harold's dereliction of duty on David's education appeared again and boundless suffering hit her again. However, she could blame and resent nobody at this time. Harold had gone through the hardships that did not belong to him, and he even needed her to comfort and encourage him. So while she watched Harold and David in her memories, she also saw herself at that time. She saw everything she had done for David and admitted that she had never encouraged Harold to take part in David's life. Maureen finally understood that she could not face the past when she committed so many mistakes. But confession was the beginning of self-redemption. Therefore, while Maureen reflected on herself, she also forgave Harold who had a growth defect, and started to understand Harold's pilgrimage.

During the process, Maureen and his neighbor Rex drove to see Harold and she found that Harold was completely different from before. The conversation between the couple was full of confidence, and he said that he had never done anything in his life and he must complete this journey. When Harold faced the difficulties and wanted to give up the pilgrimage, Maureen encouraged him and provided help. In the end, Maureen came to the San Bernadine Sanatorium again, facing Queenie's death with Harold, and both comforted each other and went home. Maureen also completed the self-redemption of her own soul.

5. Conclusion

Undoubtedly, Harold was fortunate, because he was able to take an unlikely pilgrimage. Since he suffered from miseries that ordinary people could not experience, he thought he would have lived a life of numbness. However, after a long pilgrimage, he eventually awakened himself, successfully rescuing himself and establishing a new relationship with his wife. He tried to make up for the regret left by his previous life.

Harold changed from a faithless man to a faithful one. Just as the garage girl said, if you have faith, you can do anything. Harold began his journey with the faith that he could save Queenie, and during the process he had enough time to think

about problems in his life from different aspects. Although that faith did not save Queenie, it saved Harold's life in another way. So the journey can also be described as the path of self-redemption of Harold. When the tragedy has yet taken place, you can make every effort to stop it. When it is done, do not hesitate to set foot on your own path of redemption.

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