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The Contemporary Bildungsromane: *About a Boy* and
Slam by Nick Hornby

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Introduction

Nick Hornby's two novels *About a Boy* (1998) and *Slam* (2007) present the troubled souls of two boys: eleven-year-old Marcus and sixteen-year-old Sam. These protagonists experience critical events, which force them to develop prematurely. Both boys have close relationships in their lives, which affect them in their journey as they contribute to shaping, aiding, and hindering Marcus and Sam's progress. *About a Boy* and *Slam* are coming of age novels, which depict the protagonists' developmental process in their search for a harmonious life.

These novels seem to obey the trajectory of the traditional bildungsroman in that they follow the progress of individuals who experience developments. A bildungsroman is a "Novel of development" (1 Kontje) which typically depicts the life of a young man who goes from childhood into adulthood (16 Kontje) through a "linear" process of development (1 Minden). However, Susan Ashley Gohlman has developed a new definition of the genre, namely: the contemporary bildungsroman, which also accentuates development. Gohlman's definition contains alterations to some of the standard traits of a traditional bildungsroman. Firstly, the hero of a contemporary bildungsroman can be anyone "who attempts to achieve success" (204 Gohlman) in life and does not need to reach adulthood to experience development (33 Gohlman). Secondly, Gohlman has divided the contemporary bildungsprozess into three parts, all of which in some way deviate from the traditional definition. Firstly, "the nature and variety of experience" entails the beginning of a change in a protagonist's life who is ready to try to change his future as opposed to merely letting his circumstances shape him (29 Gohlman). Secondly, "the mode of learning" depicts the journey, which is anything but straight as it entails both setbacks and advancements (29 Gohlman). Lastly, "the bildungsziel" describes the protagonist's success or failure in finding their individual harmony in life (29 Gohlman) whereas the traditional definition does not accept failure (205 Gohlman).

The protagonists in *About a Boy* and *Slam* experience critical events, which force them to develop prematurely. Marcus' mother tries to commit suicide, which leads to Marcus taking on the role of an adult, resulting in Marcus forgetting that he is merely a child. Contrastingly, in *Slam*, Sam is about to be a teenage father but is not ready to become an adult and as a result, Sam clings to his childhood. Ultimately, both Marcus and Sam develop during their journey compared to their starting points. However, it will be shown that both protagonists will fail in their attempt to find harmony, and that their search goes beyond the

frame of narration. Both Marcus and Sam will be shown to follow the contemporary bildungsprozess despite the fact that they go down quite contrary paths as Marcus assumes adult responsibilities, whereas Sam takes a firm hold of his childhood. Therefore, this essay will argue that *About a Boy* and *Slam* belong to the genre of a contemporary bildungsroman as defined by Gohlman, despite the fact that the protagonists develop in opposite directions, and will be analysed in connection to the close relationships in their lives. Firstly, the protagonists provide a starting point of their journey when they are to be compared to the definition of a hero of a contemporary bildungsroman. Furthermore, their development will be traced according to the three stages of the contemporary bildungsprozess in terms of the beginning of a change, the journey and finding harmony. In the beginning of a change, the protagonists' developments are set in motion by life changing events. The journey depicts the protagonists' course of progress as well as setbacks. In finding harmony, the protagonists will be shown to have developed, but that their attempt to find harmony has failed.

The (Contemporary) Bildungsroman

The term bildungsroman was coined in the nineteenth century by Karl Morgenstern (15 Kontje) and translates into a “*Novel of development, novel of formation, or novel of education*” (ix Kontje). These translations indicate the basic developmental process that lays the foundation for the genre. Thomas L. Jeffers says that when the concept of the bildungsroman evolved, it corresponded with the idea that children “were not miniature adults”, and that children instead needed to be shaped and guided (2). Therefore, novels that depict protagonists who are being shaped and developed came to be. However, there are various opinions of what a bildungsroman should contain and according to Gohlman, what critics mostly accept as a common denominator is “that it is a genre in which the protagonist gains knowledge of the self and the world through direct experience” (ix). In other words, a bildungsroman is a coming of age story, which focuses on a protagonist's development. This main idea of development provides the foundation for the contemporary bildungsroman genre, which has been defined by Gohlman

The first deviation in Gohlman's contemporary bildungsroman is “the hero” which defines what a protagonist must be like in contrast to the protagonist in a traditional bildungsroman (29). “The hero” also provides a starting point of his or her development (29 Gohlman). The protagonist of a traditional bildungsroman is according to Todd Kontje, a

“young man from birth to his completed *Bildung*, identified as the point when the apprentice becomes a master” (16) which describes a protagonist’s journey that begins in adolescence and moves towards adulthood as he or she learns from what they experience. Whereas in the contemporary bildungsroman the mere physical development is not of importance as “the journey is primarily a spiritual one, the interior distance covered is the only real measure of progress made” (33 Gohlman). To have the possibility to measure to what extent the protagonists develop, a determination of their starting points is of importance, which the hero presents in the beginning of the novel (Gohlman 30). Furthermore, A hero in a contemporary bildungsroman can be anyone “of whatever class or ethnic background who attempts to achieve success in conventional middle-class society ... regardless of whether that person succeeds or fails in his or her efforts” (205 Gohlman). Therefore, anyone who aspires to find harmony in life by trying to make an internal or external change can be a hero, whether he or she manages to achieve this wish or not.

Gohlman’s contemporary bildungsprozess begins with “the nature and variety of experience” which entails the beginning of a change in the protagonist’s life (29). In this aspect of the process, the contemporary and traditional bildungsprozess are quite similar. In the traditional bildungsroman what initiates the hero’s development is “some form of loss or discontent [which] must jar [the protagonist] at an early stage” (Hader). This sets the bildungsprozess in motion and the hero is then ready “to learn the lessons that life has to offer him” (3 Gohlman). In a similar manner, the process in a contemporary bildungsroman begins when there is “a point in the novel when the hero’s movement begins to take a discernible direction”, which is a movements that can be caused by either external events or internal changes (29 Gohlman). The difference between the two is that the protagonist in a contemporary bildungsroman does not simply allow life to shape itself; instead, he or she takes an active part in moulding a desirable future (30 Gohlman). The protagonist cannot decide exactly what will happen, but he or she makes an effort to change by trying to take the future into their own hands, instead of simply accepting whatever fate may lay ahead.

The contemporary bildungsprozess continues with “the mode of learning”, which depicts the protagonist’s journey and all of its successes and failures (29 Gohlman). The traditional conception of what the journey in a bildungsroman entails, are experiences that happen “in a fairly straight line” (Oxford English Dictionary Online). Furthermore, Michael Minden explains that “the idea of *Bildung* – the development of formation of a young man – is basically linear” (1). Both definitions give the impression of a journey that steadily moves

from one place to another: from insecurity to harmony. These definitions are the opposite to how Gohlman describes the journey of the contemporary bildungsprozess: “[it is] not a simple one-dimensional process. The path from A to B inevitably includes taking detours losing one’s way occasionally, retracing one’s steps, speeding up at times, slowing down or even standing still” (33). The path towards a harmonious life is not straight and can entail several obstacles.

The fourth and final part of the bildungsprozess is “the bildungsziel” (29) which concerns if or when the protagonist finds harmony in life. The goal in a traditional bildungsroman is reached when the “values of the social order become manifest in the protagonist” (Hader). Contrastingly, the protagonist’s purpose in the contemporary bildungsroman differs because it is “seldom spelled out in conventional terms. We don’t know what will become of [the protagonist]” (32 Gohlman) and the moment of finding harmony cannot always be pinpointed to a certain point in life (32 Gohlman). The protagonists are searching for harmony in life, but harmony is an individual matter and one hero’s satisfaction might not be the same as another’s (32). Some heroes find “the goal of self-knowledge”, whereas others “have acquired this ‘added dividend’ that self-knowledge sometimes produces”, which is “in itself is sufficient” (32). The completion is entirely individual, and in some cases, it is not found at all (205 Gohlman). The importance lays in the protagonist’s effort to try to find harmony in life.

The Protagonists

The protagonists in a contemporary bildungsroman provide individual starting points of the journey they are about to embark on. The starting points will, in comparison to the protagonists’ final stage, provide a measure of development. The protagonist can be of any “class or ethnic background” as long as an attempt to find harmony in life can be detected (205 Gohlman). The protagonists do not have to succeed in their search to find harmony; instead, their effort is what is of importance. In addition, the protagonist of a contemporary bildungsroman does not need to reach adulthood because the “interior distance covered is the only real measure of progress made” (33 Gohlman). Therefore, to grasp the extent of the protagonist’s development, an evaluation of their starting points must be established.

Marcus in *About a Boy* is, to begin with, very insecure and lacks both friendships and a male role model. Because of the fact that Marcus lives with his single mother and does not

have an ideal relationship with his estranged father, he is missing a male role model that he can look up to. Whenever Marcus goes to visit his father on the occasional weekend, they mostly “[watch] a load of telly”, and the fact that they do not speak much shows that they do not have a close relationship (38 *AB*). Furthermore, Marcus and his mother have recently moved to London and Marcus has not made any friends yet. Instead, he has become the subject of extreme bullying. His rather peculiar ways, like singing aloud in class, irritate his fellow schoolmates, and Marcus finds himself to be the object of ridicule. When Marcus’ teacher asks the class how one knows if someone is crazy, they suggest singing aloud in class (referring to Marcus’ habit) (16 *AB*). When the teacher accepts the answer instead of defending Marcus, it is indicated that teachers – alongside Marcus’ schoolmates – tend to make fun of him and make jokes at his expense: “[Marcus] looked at [his teacher], but she had this big forced grin on and she wouldn’t catch his eye. ’OK, that’s one way of telling, yes’” (16 *AB*). Consequently, Marcus has no one to rely on in school and comes across as very insecure.

In addition to Marcus’ challenging school situation, his single mother Fiona is an extremely dominant character who has a tendency to suppress Marcus’ individuality. She has a strong will and firm opinions and she does not always make it easy for Marcus to explore his own interests. This makes it very hard for him to develop his individuality and he risks turning into a version of his mother. Whenever Marcus wonders, for example, why he is a vegetarian simply because his mother is one, Fiona subtly manages to manipulate Marcus by making him feel guilty. When he contemplates other options, she influences him into doing what she wants: “[Fiona] ’I can’t stop you going to McDonald’s ... ‘How can I? I’d just be disappointed if you did’” (120 *AB*). In this way, Fiona plays on Marcus’ guilty conscience, and it becomes quite clear that she has a strong effect on him. Fiona’s opinion is that “Only shallow people [make] judgements on the basis of clothes or hair; she [does not] want him to watch rubbish television, or listen to rubbish music, or play rubbish computer games (she th[inks] they [are] all rubbish)” (13 *AB*). Even though Fiona is contradicting herself by making judgements of her own regarding the fact that certain kinds of television, music, and games are all rubbish, the text suggests that her intention is sound as she is trying to raise her child without prejudice and superficiality. However, Marcus’ individual development suffers because of Fiona’s strong beliefs. Subsequently, Marcus’ starting point shows an insecure boy who lacks support both in his home and school environment.

Marcus' starting point is in some ways similar to and in other ways different from Sam's starting point in *Slam*. Sam also lives with his single mother and has an absent father. Therefore, Sam lacks a male role model in his life because he only sees his own father once every year. However, Sam also indicates that he does not particularly like his father as he suspects him of being a racist and calls him "a bad-tempered bastard" which makes Sam turn elsewhere to find a role model (146 *Slam*). He finds one in a poster of his idol Tony Hawk – the famous skateboarder – whom Sam admires. Sam has read Hawk's autobiography numerous times and while he talks to the poster, he imagines Hawk's responses based on his book. The fact that Sam has created a relationship of his own to fulfil his need for a male role model, indicates that he is strongly in want of one. However, apart from having similar domestic predicaments, Sam and Marcus are in different situations in life. Sam has interests such as skateboarding, he has friends, and he has aspirations to go to college and study art. However, despite the fact that Sam's exterior gives the impression of being more mature than Marcus is, Sam in many other ways shows that he is still a child.

Sam's narration occasionally hints that he is rather immature. For example, Sam explains that when his friends slander girls, Sam only deems it necessary to defend these girls if there is one nearby: "[t]here have to be girls listening, though, obviously. Otherwise it's a waste of time" (15 *Slam*). At occasions like these, it becomes evident that Sam sometimes says things he does not really mean, mainly to impress girls. Subsequently, Sam gives the impression of being somewhat childish. Furthermore, when Sam eventually gets a girlfriend called Alicia and they are about to have sex, Sam is not at all ready because he keeps hoping for Alicia's parents to knock on the door and interrupt what is about to happen. However, as they do end up having sex (without protection), Sam is frightened because of the possibility that Alicia could have become pregnant. In Sam's eyes, this event turns her into something undesirable and he decides to break up with her by ignoring her until she understands that he does not want to be in a relationship anymore. This further proves that he on occasions acts in an immature manner and is not yet an adult. Consequently, Sam's starting point reveals a young boy who only has a poster hanging on his wall for a role model, and that he, in some ways, is still a child.

The Beginning of a Change

The contemporary bildungsprozess begins with “the nature and variety of existence” (29) which is the beginning of a change in the protagonists’ lives. At this point of the process, something happens that changes the course of their future. It can be either an external event or an internal change (29 Gohlman). Furthermore, the protagonists now decide to “make things happen” for themselves as opposed to simply letting them happen (30 Gohlman). Marcus in *About a Boy* experiences a life-changing event when his mother tries to commit suicide, and he is forced to become the adult in their family as he begins to consider his mother in every decision he makes. The attempted suicide also makes Marcus realise that in the event of his mother passing away, Marcus would be left all alone. Therefore, he concludes that he needs a father figure and friends. Subsequently, Marcus tries to shape his destiny in his effort to form more relationships. Similarly, in *Slam*, Sam’s life takes a surprisingly different direction when Alicia becomes pregnant and he suddenly faces fatherhood. In contrast to Marcus who becomes an adult, Sam chooses to cling on to his childhood when he takes his future into his own hands by running away from home. Sam escapes in an effort to shape his future the way he wants it to be, instead of letting the pregnancy force him onto a path he does not want to go down.

In *About a Boy*, Marcus’ mother Fiona suffers from a deep depression, which leads to her attempted suicide and consequently quickens Marcus’ development. At an early stage of the novel, Fiona tries to commit suicide because she is deeply depressed and is therefore incapable of taking care of Marcus, both physically and mentally. Gabor I. Keitner explains how a depression can affect a parent and a child: “the negative home environments of these children are noted throughout, and all of the major psychiatric disorders are related to major and chronic disruption in the parental role” (89). In this manner, Fiona’s condition changes Marcus’ life and consequently forces him to be the adult of the household. This is a major change and Marcus tries to adapt. Because of their delicate situation, Marcus lives in constant fear of being the one to cause his mother to relapse. His fear is distinctly visible when a simple thing like what programme to watch on TV becomes an issue in his mind:

He didn’t want to watch any of the soaps, because the soaps were full of trouble, and he was worried that the trouble in the soaps would remind his mum of the trouble she had in her own life. So they watched this programme about this sort of fish ... he didn’t think that would remind his mum of anything much. (4 AB)

Marcus adjusts his own choices and considers every aspect of their lives in order for his mother's mental health to stay balanced. Marcus is required to be the grown-up as Fiona is not always capable of being a parent.

In addition to not being able to take care of her son properly, Fiona also falls short in the area of communication, which leaves Marcus in a truly confused state of mind. Preceding her suicide attempt, Fiona tells Marcus: "I just know that we're not doing each other any good" (43 *AB*), suggesting that he is contributing to her depression. However, she simply ends the conversation without explaining further or talking about what she has just claimed. However, on the night, which follows her suicide attempt, Marcus and Fiona are watching a movie, which to Marcus' dismay involves multiple suicides. Instead of talking to her son about how this may make him feel troubled, Fiona merely laughs. When Marcus wants to turn it off, Fiona acts as though she cannot comprehend what makes him so upset, which confuses Marcus:

He was beginning to doubt himself. Wasn't trying to kill yourself a really big deal? Didn't you have long talks about it afterwards, and tears, and hugs? Apparently not. You just sat on the sofa and watched videos and acted as though nothing had happened. (70)

In moments such as these, Fiona's lack of communicative skills hampers Marcus' development, as it denies him the chance to address his feelings concerning her suicide attempt.

Marcus is prompted to try to create his own future in order to prevent himself from being abandoned in case his mother succeeds in taking her life. If Marcus' had had a father to rely on during critical times, he would not have had to deal with thorny situations all by himself. Marcus reasons that a family consisting of two people is not enough and that "he is going to have to find a way to solve this" (67 *AB*). Once again, he takes on the role of an adult in trying to fix this situation by going out and finding more people to fulfil the roles of family members. Gabor I. Keitner explains that a child with a depressed parent who tries to take "control over one's surroundings" is more resilient and therefore less likely to suffer from the negative home environment and the unfortunate predicament of having a depressed parent (108). Therefore, when Marcus finds Will – a bachelor in his thirties – and manages to form a friendship with him, he becomes more resilient to the effects of his mother's depression. Marcus takes control. However, despite the fact that Marcus denies seeing Will as a father figure, it becomes obvious that Will has filled the role when Marcus claims that

because of Will, he no longer needs a father: “I’m doing okay without ... I feel safer than before because I didn’t think two was enough, and now there aren’t two anymore” (270 *AB*). Consequently, Will has filled the empty slot of a father figure by giving Marcus a sense of security. Will helps ease Marcus’ burden of having to be the adult, because Marcus is no longer alone with his mother anymore.

As opposed to how Fiona’s suicide forces Marcus to take on adult responsibilities, the pregnancy in *Slam* makes Sam go in the opposite direction as he tries to cling on to his childhood. When Sam finds out that his ex-girlfriend Alicia is pregnant, it is clear that it is the beginning of a tremendous change in Sam’s life, as he is becoming a father. Bryan E. Robinson states that “[b]ecause of their young age, adolescent fathers are usually ill prepared for fatherhood” and Sam is struggling with the expectation put on him to become an adult (29). Sam explains that he “didn’t feel grown up – [he] still wanted to crawl on to [his] mum’s lap” (76 *Slam*) indicating that he is not ready for parenthood; he wants to stay a child. Robinson further explains how teenage boys that are expecting a child may feel “emotional turmoil as a natural consequence of their unfortunate circumstances” (29). This is what Sam is going through because he is expected to become an adult, even though he still feels like a child. Sam says that he is “scared to death”, but not only of becoming a father but because he believes that his entire future is ruined (217 *Slam*). Sam himself is a product of a teenage pregnancy and as a result, he has heard endless stories about the hardships of being a teenage parent. Sam mentions feeling as if he “messed [his mother] up” by being born when she was merely sixteen, which is why he feels like his future is about to be destroyed too (55 *Slam*). However, Sam refuses to become an adult and let his future be ruined, which is why he tries to save it by running away.

When Sam finds out Alicia is pregnant, he decides to run away from becoming a father by moving to another city, however eventually he realises that he needs to come back and face his situation. Sam deals with the fact that he does not want to become a father by blocking it out. He says that he “knew [he] didn’t want to be a father, so [he] had to move out of London and never come back” (110) and he “threw [his] mobile phone as far into the water as [he] could. Easy. Everything gone” (112) which temporarily gives Sam the feeling that everything is solved. Robinson explains that when teenage pregnancies occur, the teenage father often “leave[s] town or the state so that legal action will be more difficult” (31). However a legal issue is evidently not Sam’s main reason for leaving, instead his future is: “[the baby] was every bit as deadly to my chances of going to college to do art and design

etcetera as an Al Qaida operative” (110 *Slam*). Subsequently, Sam is anxious about being pushed into adulthood prematurely. Robinson also states that “stresses and anxieties of teenage fathers, although emanating from many sources, are developmental” (55). Furthermore, according to Robinson, teenage fathers experience anxiety which stems from the fact that they are forced into these “premature role transitions” (55 Robinson) which is Sam’s biggest concern as he is not ready to be a father (55 Robinson). He does not want to accept the fact that he needs to become an adult. However, in the end, Sam feels embarrassed to have “run out on” Alicia, and the trip makes Sam mature somewhat, as he returns home to face his responsibility.

When Sam is back home again, he tries a different approach to control his future: talking to his poster of Tony Hawk and accordingly try to come to terms with his predicament. Despite the fact that both Marcus and Sam lack male role models, they both look up to other people: Marcus finds Will, and Sam has Hawk. When Sam says things like “[Tony Hawk] should have a country named after him” (32 *AB*) his admiration for Hawk becomes obvious. However, Sam does not actually know Tony Hawk the person, merely the public version of him, and the voice in his autobiography. Despite this, it does not stop Sam from seeing Hawk as someone he knows when he says things like: “I was glad he’d told me” referring to Hawk’s book as if they were actual friends. Sam acts as if Hawk tells only Sam his secrets and not anyone who buys his book and Sam feels like he can talk to Hawk about anything. Therefore, when Sam comes back from his escape, he talks to Hawk to try to work out how he feels. To be able to talk to someone is obviously important to Sam in his hardship, as he says: “sometimes it doesn’t matter who you talk to, as long as you talk. That’s why I spend half my life talking to a life-sized poster” (33 *Slam*). Hawk helps Sam by simply symbolising a close friendship and providing Sam with the possibility to talk and ease his burdens. By creating this relationship, Sam tries to work through his frightening feelings regarding becoming an adult by talking to Tony Hawk - the poster.

The Journey

The contemporary bildungsprozess proceeds with the “the mode of learning” which depicts the journey that unfolds after the beginning of a movement sets the process in motion (29 Gohlman). When the protagonists’ have decided to try to take an active part in trying to shape their futures, it does not guarantee them success in shaping it the way they want because they

cannot “deliberately select and control their experiences of their apprenticeship. [They are] human being[s], not computers” (30 Gohlman). Therefore, the third part of the process describes the protagonists’ journey and all its possible detours, setbacks and successes that the journey may entail (33 Gohlman). At this stage, both Marcus and Sam encounter both progress as well as obstacles in the people they interact with and the journey towards finding harmony will be proven anything but one-dimensional. In *About a Boy* Marcus experiences both positive and negative effects when he spends time with Will and his new friend Ellie. In *Slam*, Sam’s mother Annie hinders him in his progress when her harsh experience of being a teenage parent herself, scares Sam and does not make him more accepting of his predicament. However, Sam’s relationship with his poster of Tony Hawk once again aids his development.

When Marcus in *About a Boy* meets Ellie for the first time, he wants to be just like her, but their friendship helps Marcus understand that he needs to figure out who he wants to be for himself. Ellie is notorious for making trouble and being feisty, which is exactly what Marcus needs in order to deal with the bullies in school. Marcus says that “he wishes [he and Ellie] were equally clever” (183 *AB*), which indicates that he feels inferior to Ellie but that he wants to be her equal. Ellie inspires courage in Marcus who begins to stick up for himself after having met her:

[Marcus] had enough, and he stood up to go. ‘Sit down Marcus. I haven’t finished with you yet.’ ‘I’ve finished with you.’ ... ‘SIT down.’ But he didn’t. He just walked out the way he had come in. (139 *AB*)

In this way, Marcus begins to develop a belief in himself as he enjoys Ellie’s feistiness. However, Marcus eventually realises that Ellie’s tendency to be aggressive is only admirable in the safe environment of the school. As soon as they step out of the school’s comfort zone, Marcus feels scared of what Ellie may do. When she smashes a window of a shop, Marcus realises that Ellie is not perfect, and he stops aspiring to be like her: “Ellie didn’t have to do what she had just done, and ... she had brought the trouble she was in upon herself. He was tired of it” (251 *AB*). Ellie inspires Marcus to feel confident in himself, but in the end, he does not want to be exactly like her.

Just like Marcus felt about Ellie, Marcus initially wanted to be like Will too, but once again, Marcus realises that he needs to become his own person. According to Marcus Will “knows things” (122 *AB*), and Marcus begins to imbibe Will’s knowledge about the practical things that his mother does not approve of. He asks Will about superficial things, such as

modern music, clothes, and general social aspects that Marcus is uncertain about; Marcus hopes to liberate himself from his bullies by learning about what is considered modern. In this way, Will helps Marcus develop his individuality as he lets him explore new interests, like listening to new music, and form his own opinion about it. However, Will has a tendency to lie to make himself more interesting and consequently pulls Marcus into a charade where he pretends to be Will's son (188 *AB*). Marcus then questions why Will needs to lie, when Will (in Marcus' opinion) is perfect the way he is: "Why would you tell your new girlfriend I was your son?" (192 *AB*). Consequently, because of the fact that Will feels inadequate in being himself, Marcus begins to realise materialistic things do not equal self-assurance. According to Marcus, Will knows everything that is considered modern, and yet Will does not think he is interesting enough not to lie. Obviously, Will is not as confident about himself as Marcus first thought. Once again, Marcus learns that he cannot be exactly like Will, because even Will does not want to be Will. Marcus needs to form his own individual self.

In a manner similar to how Marcus learns from his new acquaintances, in *Slam*, Sam discovers new sides in his relationship with his mother Annie and with his poster of Hawk. When Sam learns that he is to become a father, his initial reaction is: "I wanted to sit on my mum's lap. I know that sounds stupid and babyish, but I couldn't help it. On my sixteenth birthday, I didn't want to be sixteen, or fifteen, or anyteen. I wanted to be three or four ... I love you, Mum" (76 *Slam*). Thus, it becomes evident that Sam's mother Annie is a pillar in Sam's life and instils a feeling of safety. However, because of the fact that Annie got pregnant at sixteen too, she has throughout Sam's life, repeatedly talked about the many difficulties that being a teenage parent entails. Because of this, Sam is convinced that he cost her a successful future. The seriousness of these thoughts does not truly hit him until Sam himself is also facing the same reality with his imminent parenthood. Furthermore, when Annie finds out about the pregnancy, she says that Sam's future is non-existent, which makes Sam feel terrified:

Had? I *had* a future? Where was It now? I wanted her to tell me that everything was going to be all right. I wanted her to say that she'd survived, so I could too. But she wasn't telling me that. She was telling me that I didn't have a future any more. (162 *Slam*)

Instead of finding comfort in the fact that his mother succeeded in raising a child at the age of sixteen, and to learn from her experiences, Annie merely makes Sam feel more insecure with himself and fearful of his future.

In contrast to the fact that Annie's experience merely frightens Sam, instead he finds a way to cope with his fear of becoming a father by relating to Hawk's similar experiences. Sam rereads Hawk's autobiography, and finds that he relates to new parts in it that he never reflected on before, namely his sections about becoming a father:

Maybe it was more that I'd never found it that interesting before. It had never meant that much to me ... So reading about [Tony Hawk] and Erin was helpful ... Whenever you pick [Hawk's book] up, there's something in it that helps you with your life. (143-144 *Slam*)

Sam obviously feels encouraged because he can relate to Hawk. Kelley Griffith says one of the main reasons that people read literature in the first place is "because it is fun and because it speaks to us about important things" (3). However, despite the fact that Hawk helps Sam cope in his challenging time, he also hinders Sam's relationship with his own father Dave. At this point, Dave reaches out to Sam because he knows what he is going through, having had a child at sixteen himself. Dave tries to give Sam some advice, which Sam wants to take. Therefore, in a way, Hawk is an obstacle in Sam's relationship with his father, because Sam gives Hawk credit for his father's advice: "[Tony Hawk] was trying to get me to treat my own dad as if he was a proper dad, someone who might have something interesting to say to me" (260 *Slam*). It becomes obvious that Hawk is Sam's only role model as Sam cannot justify taking advice from his own father. Therefore, the poster that symbolises Sam and Hawk's friendship is tremendously important to Sam in his challenging journey.

Finding Harmony

The journey of a contemporary bildungsprozess ends with "the bildungsziel" which entails the protagonists' success or failure in finding harmony in life (29 Gohlman). What the protagonists are searching for is seldom declared in a contemporary bildungsroman because harmony is entirely individual and will differ depending on the protagonist (205 Gohlman). However, despite the fact that a protagonist may not find complete harmony, they can still develop in comparison to their starting points, due to their experiences (32 Gohlman). Both Marcus in *About a Boy* and Sam in *Slam* have experienced developmental progress in their bildungsprozess. Marcus has withdrawn from his adult duties, and learned to stay a child, whereas Sam has become a father and in some sense an adult. However, neither Marcus nor Sam finds complete harmony when their narration ends which is why both protagonists have more development ahead of them, beyond the frame of narration.

In the end, Marcus in *About a Boy* demonstrates a noticeable development compared to his starting point, as he gains confidence every day and most importantly remembers to stay a child. One of Marcus' main challenges is to deal with the fact that his mother tried to kill herself, and that she tends to suppress his individuality. In comparison to how Marcus took on adult responsibilities, by trying to take care of his mother as opposed to being cared for himself, it can be seen that he has indeed developed as he comes to realise that he is in fact merely a child:

He was only a kid. He'd been thinking that more and more recently, as he got older and older. He didn't know why. Maybe it was because, when he really was only a kid, he wasn't capable of recognizing it" (40 *AB*).

Marcus begins to let go of trying to affect his mother's illness and as a result, Marcus' repeated attempts to shape the smallest thing to make Fiona's life easier, gradually ends. This is indicated when Marcus chooses not to please his mother, when she wants to listen to her favourite singer: "'You love Joni Mitchell.' 'I don't. Not any more. I bloody hate Joni Mitchell'" (278 *AB*). Marcus is no longer afraid of causing Fiona's depression because he stops considering her in his every move. Marcus has begun to detach himself from his mother's influence, and has come to realise that he is in fact merely a child. This shows that he has developed and Marcus is beginning to scratch the surface of his individual self.

However, there is another aspect to Marcus' final chapter: it also shows how both Fiona and Will still want to change and shape Marcus, who in turn needs to find a balance between the two. It has already been established that Marcus' mother Fiona is a dominant character who tries to raise Marcus into wanting the things she approves of: for example, being a vegetarian and listening to Joni Mitchell. Will, on the other hand, has been an important part in Marcus' development as he has given him his friendship and support as well as letting him explore his own interests. However, throughout the novel, Will continuously hints that Marcus is not good enough the way he is. According to Will, Marcus needs to change his appearance and personality, in order for his bullying to stop: "You could do something about the hair" (99 *AB*). Furthermore, when Marcus disagrees and claims he likes his hair the way it is, Will indicates that Marcus then needs to accept that if he wants to look a certain way, he only has himself to blame for being bullied: 'You'll have to put up with the other kids then" (99 *AB*). This is the opposite of what Marcus' mother encourages, as she detests superficiality (13 *AB*). Therefore, Marcus needs to find a path between his two influencers and balance their inputs. In the final chapter, Will states that Marcus, who used to

have his sneakers stolen by bullies in school, now had “lost himself, and [therefore] got to walk home from school with his shoes on” (99 *AB*). This indicates that Marcus has in fact changed in the direction Will wants. When Marcus declares that he in fact, “hate[s] Joni Mitchell” (278) it excites Will who believes that: “beyond any shadow of a doubt, that Marcus would be OK” (278). This is why Marcus has further development ahead of him, as he still has not found his own individual voice. However, he is on his way.

Similarly to Marcus, Sam also displays some development in *Slam* at the end of his journey in comparison to his starting point. In the beginning, Sam showed signs of being rather immature and expressed a wish to want to stay a child forever (76 *Slam*). Evidence that Sam has developed in comparison to his starting point is visible in his descriptions of his ex-girlfriend. Before Sam becomes a father, his description of Alicia reads, “She looked terrible, to be honest. She’d put weight on, so her face was much fatter, and her eyes were puffy from sleep, and her hair was greasy” (88 *Slam*). However, when the baby has been born, Sam merely sees value in the fact that Alicia prioritises their child, as opposed to her appearance:

She didn’t look terrible to me now though. She looked tired, and her face was puffy, and her hair was greasy ... She was different, I could see that. But so was everything else. I don’t think I’d have liked her so much if she’d stayed the same. It would have been like she wasn’t taking [their son] seriously. (243 *Slam*)

Evidently Sam has undergone a development as his experiences have taught him that taking responsibility means that you sometimes have to give up other things, like caring about your appearance. Dwight Garner describes *Slam* by saying that “it is a portrait of a prickly and interesting boy who is forced to become, very quickly, a man” (Knocked Up), which accentuates the fact that Sam was a child at the beginning of the novel, but at the end he has developed and has become a father and an adult.

Despite the fact that Sam has grown tremendously in comparison to his starting point, he has yet to find complete harmony in life. At the end of his narration, two years have passed and he has a two-year-old son. With the help of his friendship with his poster of Tony Hawk, Sam makes an effort to develop and come to terms with the fact that he is a teenage father. However, when Sam evaluates his current life – two years later - on a scale from one to ten he says: “I’m afraid I couldn’t go any higher than a three. This isn’t what I had in mind. How could it be” (288 *Slam*). Sam is clearly not satisfied with his life and – just like Marcus – his

journey continues beyond the novel. Sam needs to make peace with his unfortunate circumstance and the fact that he is a teenage father and he has yet to find harmony in life.

Conclusion

This essay shows that *About a Boy* and *Slam* belong to Gohlman's definition of a contemporary bildungsroman despite the fact that the protagonists move in opposite directions. It can be stated that the protagonists in both novels are considered heroes, because they aspire to find harmony in their lives (205 Gohlman) and because it is the inner development that is of importance as opposed to their physical development (33 Gohlman). Both novels comply with the contemporary bildungsprozess, when there is a beginning of a change due to the events that create a movement.

In *About a Boy*, Marcus' mother tries to commit suicide, which forces Marcus to be an adult whereas the pregnancy in *Slam* frightens Sam and causes him to cling to his childhood. Both Marcus and Sam decide to take control of their lives: Marcus succeeds in his attempt by finding Will, while Sam fails in his effort to run away. However, Sam regains some control as he talks to his poster of Tony Hawk which somewhat eases his burden.

Furthermore, the novels follow the contemporary bildungsprozess when the journey that follows the life changing events, contains both success and failure. In *About a Boy* Marcus is positively inspired by Ellie and Will as Marcus gains self-confidence and receives the opportunity to explore his individuality. However, Marcus' attempt to become like Ellie and Will fails and he realises that he needs to find his own voice. In *Slam*, Sam is hindered in his development when his mother's tales of woe regarding teenage pregnancy frighten him and does not inspire him to move towards adulthood. However, Sam finds strength when he can relate to Tony Hawk's similar experiences in his autobiography.

In the final part of the contemporary bildungsprozess, it is visible that Marcus and Sam do not succeed in finding complete harmony at the end of their journeys. However, a comparison to their starting points shows that they have in fact developed. In *About a Boy* Marcus has found some self-confidence in comparison to his initial insecure self. He has begun to resist his mother's dominance by exploring his individuality and rejecting some of her values like for example what music to listen to. Furthermore, Marcus' entire world no longer revolve merely around his mother and her illness, as he realises that he is just a child

who should not have responsibilities of that magnitude. Development is detected in *Slam* as well in comparison to Sam's starting point, which showed that he is rather childish and that he lacks a role model. He matures during his journey, which is visible when he has become a father and values the way Alicia takes care of their son as opposed to judging her for her appearance. Furthermore, Sam's relationship to his poster of Tony Hawk gives him a role model and helps him on the way of coming to terms with his predicament.

However, in the end, the contemporary bildungsprozess does not demand that the protagonists succeed in obtaining harmony because the importance lay in their efforts to try. In *About a Boy*, Marcus fails because he has not found his own voice yet. Marcus' future challenge is to find a balance between his mother's and Will's influence. In a similar manner, in *Slam* it becomes evident that Sam also fails in finding harmony, as he merely gives his life three marks on a scale of ten. He is not content and has not fully come to terms with being a premature father. Ultimately, the protagonists in *About a Boy* and *Slam* experience developments, which follow the process of a contemporary bildungsroman, despite the fact that their courses of events lead them in opposite directions. However, because Marcus and Sam fail in finding complete harmony in life, the contemporary bildungsprozess goes beyond the frame of narration, in search for harmony.

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