

Growth and Education in *Educated: A Memoir*

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Abstract: *Educated: A Memoir* is a bildungsroman written by Tara Westover, which is about the author's personal experiences. The growth of woman, the value of education and the influence of family of origin in the book are worth people to consider deeply. By analyzing Tara's growth in study, dealing with the relationships with others, religion and finance, this paper finds that the main factors promoting her growth are education, her own strong willingness and the help from others. Meanwhile, the factor hindering her growth comes from her family of origin. Education is the most important factor for Tara to achieve success. It can be found that the value of education is to complete the transformation of people and make them grow up. Finally, the writer will discuss how to play the role of the value of education to the most: the close connection and cooperation between families, schools and the society.

Keywords: *Educated: A Memoir*; Education; Family of Origin; Growth.

1. Introduction

Educated: A Memoir is written by an American writer and historian Tara Westover, who also is the protagonist of this novel. It chronicles her life from her upbringing in rural Idaho to her scholarship and eventual doctorate at Cambridge University[1]. Born to survivalists in the mountains of Idaho, Tara has never been to school until she is at 17. Tara's father is a bigoted Mormon and her mother is a devout follower of her father. Tara's family lives off her father's fanatical beliefs, which he imposes on each member of his family. When her brother Tyler went to college, Tara decided to change her life. Her pursuit of knowledge changed her life, leading her across oceans and continents, all the way to Harvard and Cambridge University. In 2018, Westover's first novel *Educated: A Memoir* was published. Soon, it became one of the novels which were in the best-selling lists of New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and other mainstream media and selected by Amazon.com as the Best Book of 2018[2]. What's more, this novel attracted a lot of attention and was always in the best-selling lists for years so that Tara Westover was named as the "Influential Person of the Year" by Time[3]. Most scholars are devoted to exploring the influence of Tara's family of origin, religion and power discourse, and the educational topics involved are mostly short book reviews[4,5,6]. However, few scholars have explored the influencing factors behind Tara's growth and education and the profound connotation of education. This thesis will focus on the growth process from four aspects: study, relationships, religion and finance. Besides, the factors behind Tara's growth should not be ignored and this paper will analyze what has affected her a lot during her growth. Growth is an ongoing process in people's life. *Educated: A Memoir* describes a girl's growth process which contributes to the education she has received. It can be found that education plays a significant role in her life, but there are other factors that also help her to grow. In order to find out that, people will understand the true meaning of education and change their stereotype about being educated and then pursue more meaningful life.

2. Tara's Growth

2.1. Tara's Growth on Study

Tara is born in a family which is crazy about Mormonism. Growing in such a family, Tara has a little chance to study. Her father is a doglike follower of Mormonism so that he sees public schools as tools for brainwashing children, and hospitals as concentration camps that harm but do not save. To be fact, her father is just like a ruler of her family, of the mountain, and nobody can revolt him. When Tara and her siblings are at a young age, they were instilled with the belief by their father with Mormonism to reject formal education and embrace homeschooling. In this isolated upbringing, Tara fully trusted her father and never realized that she should and had the right to receive an education. The only knowledge that their father allows them to access is the Book of Mormon and the Bible. Therefore, Tara's father can be called the biggest obstacle in her way to pursue knowledge. Tara's mother initially disagreed with her husband's approach. She had encouraged Tara to break free from the constraints of the family to go to school and even concealed the reason for copying the tax returns when Tara applied for welfare. On the other hand, although Tara did not receive a systematical and formal school education, she gained a unique perception and way of thinking in her father's junkyard and in nature. Tara learned to read and write solely by browsing scriptures and speeches, and instinctively encountered the mysterious laws of physics and nature in her strenuous labor. This raw, direct education has given Tara a keen and creative eye to examine problems.

Tyler is the guide who leads Tara into the realm of formal education. Tyler's rebellion against their distorted family provides Tara with the courage to break free from the constraints of her family and embrace school education. Initially, Tara is confused by Tyler's betrayal of their homeschooling, which shifts to questioning, and ultimately transforms into acceptance. This phase is crucial in stimulating Tara to pursue formal education. During Tara's preparation for the college entrance exam, Tyler assists her in finding schools and helps her study mathematics. As Tara entered the realm of school education, she discovered new

possibilities in life, which fully unfolded before her after she officially entered Brigham Young University.

Tara's outlook on life changes dramatically when she attends Brigham Young University. In the period of Brigham Young University, Tara has studied history, geography and politics. She also is honored with "Outstanding Graduate". Besides, under the help of professor, Tara chooses to have a further study. Eventually, Tara has got the master's degree from Cambridge University and the doctorate from Harvard University. In almost every aspect of her life, the "alternative" university experiences cause her to experience self-doubt. Of course, at the most basic level, Tara is full and happy. It is easy to see that Tara's journey to school is tortuous. Like a seed, she experiences the processes of sowing, budding, eroding and growing. She may have encountered misunderstandings and obstacles from some people, but she also has understanding and help, and the results are satisfactory. Tara has not only learned knowledge, but she has also learned to resist and to face the past and challenges.

2.2. Tara's Growth on Religion

The book begins by noting that Tara's family is Mormon, especially her father, who is a true Mormon, and his love for Mormon has reached at a peak. Her father does not support his children going to school, but, paradoxically, he does not dislike learning. Her father would read the Bible to Tara and his siblings, and it becomes a fixture in the family. Tara does not have a bar of soap in her house and she does not wash her hands after going to the toilet, which is noticed by her grandmother, who lives in the town, and when she tells her father, he would retort impatiently. When either of his children do anything against God, father would preach to them. When a family member falls ill, Tara's father would choose to look for her mother, an unqualified doctor, rather than send sick family members to the hospital. Her father believes that a woman's place is the family, so when Tara chose to go to school, her father chatters and makes no sense. As Mormons, the influence on her fathers is most vivid. In her father's eyes, the Bible is an inviolable dogma, and in the children's eyes, father becomes a divine being. Tara's father often speaks of the Illuminati, an organization he would refer to whenever something is done against God. Any act of speech other than the Bible is wrong in her father's eyes. As her father's son, Shawn brings his violence and madness to life. Her father's mad state has caused great damage to the family. Tara does not have the ability to tell right from wrong or think for herself and she could do is look up to her father as a role model.

After entering college, Tara was uncomfortable with thoughts and habits that were completely different from her previous life. Some habits make others look at her differently. At first she thinks what she is doing is right, but she does not realize the indelible influence of her father's education when she is young, which indirectly lead to Tara's self-doubt. Tara is a Mormon herself when she enters university, and her thoughts and actions make it difficult for her to fit in. The education she receives in university gives her the ability to distinguish right from wrong and make her realize that her father's education is all wrong. Maybe she believes what her father tells her to believe before she goes to college. Tara is smart. Before entering the university, her rebellious behavior against her father also proves that she is capable of independent thinking. However, after receiving the university education, she is more determined to pursue her own. She

rejects what her father believes and find what she wanted to believe. When Tara entered Brigham Young University, she not only had to confront new knowledge but also had to face and adapt to completely different ideologies and lifestyles. The confusion, surprise, pain, and adjustments she experienced in college gradually led Tara toward a stance that was in opposition to her original beliefs.

2.3. Tara's Growth on Relationships

From the novel, it can be seen that Tara's attitude towards her father Sean and Tyler has changed significantly, and these three people have the most influence on Tara. Tara lives in a twisted family where her father and brother Shawn are both extremely paranoid. Tara's father's education is authoritarian. He considers himself the ultimate authority in the household. "If the conifers and sagebrush are soloists, the wheat field is a corps de ballet, each stem following all the rest in bursts of movement, a million ballerinas bending, one after the other, as great gales dent their golden heads[7: xi]." Under the rule of this singular authority, Tara gradually lost her sense of self; she firmly believed that her father's words were the ultimate truth and held herself to the strict standards he set. The oppressive rule of her father led Tara to be compliant and submissive for a long time. Tara's brother Shawn is the embodiment of their father; he not only physically tormented Tara but also inflicted psychological harm. Tara is humiliated by Shawn when she shows her arms from work; Tara is called a prostitute by Shawn when he sees Tara wearing makeup; when Tara tries to run away from the family, Shawn defies her mother and becomes demonic. These experiences caused Tara to close herself off, leaving her sensitive and insecure. Tara's another brother Tyler, is an anomaly. Tara sees Tyler as a very easygoing person, unlike her father and Shawn. As Tara matures physically and mentally, Tara begins to understand Tyler. Tyler's image in Tara's mind gradually became tall.

After Tara received a formal education, she gradually shed the imprints of her father. This was evident when, after Shawn's accident, Tara chose to take him to the hospital instead of bringing him home. It was also reflected in her defiance of her father's warnings, as she resolutely rolled up her sleeves to expose her arms to the breeze. When Tara felt desperate and isolated from her family members, Tyler stood firmly by her side, encouraging her to believe in herself. This support helped her maintain her sense of self and achieve complete independence in her family relationships. In fact, this novel not only describes Tara's family affection, in the latter half of the novel, but also describes the friendship and love. When Tara first enters university, she does not get rid of her family's influence on her. She would quarrel with her parents and siblings because of their different opinions, and finally ends up unhappy. It also leaves Tara in self-doubt, wondering if her stubbornness has led to the result. Fortunately, her friends give Tara the biggest tolerance and help, so that Tara out of the haze.

2.4. Tara's Growth on Finance

Tara lives in a family in Buck Peak. There are several children in Tara's family, but none of them, except the older brother, has birth certificates. Her father hates the government and school, so he does not get birth certificates for his children or car insurance in case the government find out. At first, her mother works as an assistance of a midwife, but later, her mother takes over the job. Since then, the family's income has been higher than before, but the disadvantage is that her

mother does not have a legal license, so she has to worry about it every time. Her father would throw a tantrum over missing a piece of iron because it would let him lose money. In addition, fathers may “save money” by not hiring workers, using their children as free labor. When Tara’s mother works as a midwife, she buys a phone for convenience, even though she knows it would annoy Tara’s father. Tara’s father will spend a lot of money to buy a demonic machine to dismantle those scrap iron for the sake of improving work efficiency, but turn a blind eye when the children almost lose their lives because of it.

Tara’s older brothers, dissatisfied with their father, leaving home and going to work, reducing the burden on the family. But that does not lessen Tara’s pain. Just like graduation of students, as the older children leave, the father passes on the “responsibility” to the younger ones. One group goes, and another is waiting. As Tara grows old enough to achieve partial financial independence, Shawn and her father become obstacles to Tara’s growth. Shawn would beat Tara up for putting on makeup. When Tara asks to go to school, her father continues to brainwash her, but that does not change Tara’s mind. Therefore, when Tara concentrates on her studies, her father would try to kick Tara out of the house and ask her for money. However, Tara has no money to rent a house, which causes the dilemma of Tara.

Fortunately, Tara gets into university. At university, when it offers scholarship for her hard work, she initially turns them down. Now in the eyes of most people, this kind of behavior is incomprehensible. But this is not a good thing for Tara, for she has been so affected by her father that she could not betray her family. After the psychological work of the professor for Tara, Tara finally accepts her life. With the help of others, Tara has grown.

3. Factors behind Tara’s Growth

3.1. Education

Education has always been a topic of concern to people, but people rarely think about what education has brought us. From the novel, it is not difficult to see that Tara does not receive any education when she is young. All she has access to is the Bible in the hands of her father, who restrains every child with his Mormon religion. So when Tara is young, the only education she receives from her father is the Bible. In fact, compared to her father, her mother is a very contradictory person. After Tara’s mother marries her father, she is obedient to him in everything. Her mother has several books, which Tara and her siblings are thankful for. Her mother, too, is a vacillator, but she would help Tara when she chooses to study.

It can be seen from the book that the father’s education of his children is completely based on the Bible, which is also the father’s irrational worship and belief in God. Maybe in her father’s eyes, it is an education, but for now, it is just an extension of her father’s crazy belief that he wants to raise his children as faithful Mormons, just like him. Maybe it was an opportunity for Tara—Tara finds Tyler secretly reading books, but the others do not notice, which inadvertently gives Tara a chance to escape from Buck Peak.

Tara’s older brother Tyler is her biggest help on her way to the university. In the process of Tyler preparing to study, Tara finds Tyler secretly reading. Tyler also allows Tara listen to the CD and Tara first feel the happiness in the song. Maybe for this reason, Tyler is different from others to Tara and Tyler

is very supportive of Tara to go to school. He would later help Tara as she prepared for her entrance exams. In addition, Tara’s grandmother also wants to take Tara away from the family, but Tara does not see the point of going to school because her father stays home for authority.

When Tara is preparing for the entrance examination, she encounters great difficulty. The subjects for the university examination are almost unknown to her and she has no foundation at all. She begins to teach herself, but the formulas in the books are difficult to her. She asks her father for help, and also Tyler for help. Tara realizes that what Tyler is teaching is completely different from what her father is teaching. What Tyler has taught is true, not the way his father has solved the problem. It is Tyler who inspires Tara to study, and it is Tyler who gives her intellectual help and spiritual support, which gives Tara the courage to face her father.

Tara has not been systematically schooled before going to university, so when she takes her first entrance exam, she is at a loss to see the other students marching in. After Tara enters university, what she touches, sees and learns are all different from what his father has taught her. Tara begins to sway in her heart. She sees through her father’s lies, but falls into self-doubt. Education makes Tara reflect and learn how to accept help from others, and how to deal with her father and family. Education brings her not only knowledge, but also attitudes towards life. Without education, it is hard to imagine Tara would still be living in that twisted home as a midwife, and living in her father’s shadow. Therefore, education regenerates Tara and builds a kingdom of her own out of the ruins.

3.2. Willingness

This is definitely a subjective factor when Tara is growing up. In Tara’s family, there is no democracy. Tara lives in an environment of violence and paranoia. In such a home, the young Tara does not realize the damage that would come later. In the eyes of the child Tara, her father is her role model, is the general existence of God. In the eyes of the readers, the father’s actions are totally wrong and will cause indelible damage to the children. But in Tara and her family eyes, her father is an authoritative presence, just like the Bible he reads to them, the God they believe in. Therefore, when Tara is young, she does not know to resist, even she does not have the sense to resist.

When Tyler leaves home to study and rebels against his father, Tara thinks he is an anomaly. Tara sees resistance in Tyler, but at the time she thinks it is irrational, and she did not understand why Tyler has left his family to pursue his school dreams. Tara would help her father with the scrap work. When Tara goes to her grandmother’s house in town, she thinks of her father’s words and could not understand her grandmother. And in her father’s mind, her grandmother is Illuminati, which makes him scoff. Therefore, at this stage, the readers cannot see Tara’s rebellious consciousness, which has not yet grown in Tara’s heart. Tara is her father’s prisoner.

When Tara decides to go to school, she also faces a lot of opposition. When Shawn catches Tara wearing makeup, he would drag her home and yell at her, punch her and call her a prostitute, which is incredible. At this time of Tara will ignite in the heart of Shawn’s resentment, so when Shawn is sent to the hospital due to industrial injury, Tara is looking forward to Shawn can die. When her father tells her that a woman’s final place is at home, Tara thinks of her miserable life—working as a midwife, never escaping Buck’s Peak.

Meanwhile, Tara's sense of rebellion grows stronger. With this will, Tara is admitted to Brigham Young University and escapes from Buck Peak.

After entering college, Tara does not quickly adapt to university life. At this time, she has not completely gotten rid of her father's shadow in a sense, and still lives under his shadow. She would come home when she knows her father is injured; her siblings treat her as if she were an anomaly, as Tara feels about Tyler at before. Along the way, Tara experiences self-doubt and even bipolar disorder, which seems to be part of her metamorphosis. She also wants to go back to her family to prove her bigotry wrong and make up for her "fault" with her father and family. However, Tara again finds that she and her family's outlook on life is tremendous different, even though she loves the family, but she could not agree with this pattern of life. Eventually, Tara has chosen to leave the house, to live the life she has chosen for herself. She has completed her transformation. From ignorance to obedience, to resistance, and to struggle, then to success.

3.3. Help from Others

In the process of building her own transformation, Tara receives help from all aspects of life, including her family, friends, classmates and teachers. This is undoubtedly the most precious treasure of Tara's growth.

Her brother Tyler provides Tara with academic help and emotional comfort. As described in the book, Tara first sees Tyler secretly reading and thought he is the odd man out. She would listen to Tyler's CD, a choir song, and Tara would be refreshed. While Tara is still basking in her father's sweet talk, Tyler told Tara that she should study and live a different life. But Tara does not understand. When Tara is preparing for the entrance examination of Brigham Young University, Tyler would take the initiative to teach Tara how to solve math problems. That is why Tara regards Tyler as her idol. Tara may have laughed at her younger self, but now she and Tyler are the same kind of people who have become "traitors" to their families and their "beliefs." It is just like the words in the book: "How do you thank a brother who refused to let you go, who seized your hand and wrenched you upward, just as you had decided to stop kicking and sink? There aren't words for that, either"[7: 317].

Tara's grandmother, who lives in the town, is a very particular person. Tara's mother has complained to Tara about her grandmother's complicated lifestyle and habits, which leaves a bad impression on Tara. Because her father is Mormon, there is never soap in the house or washing his hands after going to the toilet. When Grandmother sees Tara behaving this way, she would tell Tara what to do, but Tara would not listen. Even if Tara does not totally agree with her grandmother's lifestyle and fancy furnishings, she would benefit from her grandmother's guidance. The other grandmother, who also talks about taking Tara away from her family, takes her to another place to help her go to school. But Tara does not see the point of going to school and chooses to stay with the family she thinks she has been loving. Even if her grandmother does not succeed, Tara's heart has planted a seed, waiting for germination.

After entering the university, Tara does not fully adapt to university life. She would be ashamed of the strange clothes and behavior of her dorm mates, and she would be sad if she failed her exams. Tara could not accept college funding because she is afraid of the Illuminati and could not deceive

herself. Her teacher helps her with counseling, helps her get over it. In addition, the teacher will also help Tara with her studies. In Tara's dilemma, she has lapsed into self-doubt and wastes her time doing nothing. Fortunately, her friends and teachers are tolerant and considerable, and she finally comes out of the haze and faced life with confidence.

In the process of growing up, people inevitably encounter all kinds of setbacks. However, their friends, relatives, classmates, teachers and even strangers are all treasures waiting to be discovered. Tara's path to adulthood is painful, and without those help, she would not have become the confident, brave Tara.

3.4. Family of Origin

Family of origin refers to the family in which one is born and raised. The atmosphere of the home, the traditions, the interactions of the family, all affect the growth of the child. Tara's family of origin is an important factor hindering Tara's growth, which puts Tara in many difficulties. Tara's family of origin is a very twisted one. Her father's paranoia and the mother's cowardice have made the children in this family have some character defects. Shawn's violence and paranoia are perfectly inherited from his father. Tyler is dissatisfied with his father's behavior and chooses to leave home to study and find a different life. The harm and fear brought to Tara by her family of origin are indelible. The family of origin makes Tara unable to integrate into the university life normally and even makes her doubt himself once. Tara eventually leaves home to study, but in the process, Tara becomes paralyzed and falls into self-doubt. Fortunately, Tara reinvents herself and her life with the help of her brother Tyler, classmates, friends and teachers.

4. The Enlightenment of *Educated: A Memoir*

Education is pure and it should be received actively. In Tara's eyes, education means gaining different perspectives and understanding different people, experiences and histories. Be educated, but do not let your education ossify into arrogance. Education should be an expansion of the mind, a deepening of empathy and a broadening of perspectives. It should not make your perspective more stubborn. After education, people can get valuable growth in any aspects. Besides, only people get educated actively can they achieve great success. Therefore, people should face up to education and explore the most suitable education for children's development.

The family of origin also has a great influence on the growth of children. The environment of the family of origin, the parenting style of parents, will affect the children's life. Parents are their children's first teachers, and their words and deeds will always affect their children. Every family is different, what people need to do is to find a life pattern suitable for each family, so as to help children get better growth. In addition, in order to get better education and get the most out of education, family, schools and society should connect together tightly, so that the chain of education can operate smoothly.

5. Conclusion

Educated: A Memoir is a book full of education meaning. Tara's family of origin hurt her a lot in an unthinkable way. However, education brought her into a bright future where she

could think and live freely. She received higher education, gave up her original religion, accepted scholarship and established the dedicate relationship with her family and so on. From these changes, the conclusion can be made that Tara has remade herself. Furthermore, the factors behind her growth are also important. Tara's growth process is worth thinking about, how a person can reinvent himself through education and reshape the world view. It is worth paying attention to constantly improve oneself by taking advantage of favorable factors in unfavorable environment, and finally grow into an independent personality

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