

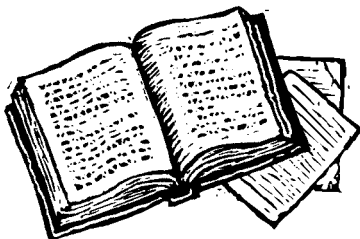
Bildungsroman

MOVEMENT ORIGIN

c. 1766

Bildungsroman is the name affixed to those novels that concentrate on the development or education of a central character. German in origin, “bildungs” means formation, and “roman” means novel. Although *The History of Agathon*, written by Christoph Martin Wieland in 1766–1767, may be the first known example, it was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, written in 1795, that took the form from philosophical to personal development and gave celebrity to the genre.

More than any other type of novel, the Bildungsroman intends to lead the reader to greater personal enrichment as the protagonist journeys from youth to psychological or emotional maturity. Traditionally, this growth occurs according to a pattern: the sensitive, intelligent protagonist leaves home, undergoes stages of conflict and growth, is tested by crises and love affairs, then finally finds the best place to use his/her unique talents. Sometimes the protagonist returns home to show how well things turned out. Some Bildungsromans end with the death of the hero, leaving the promise of his life unfulfilled. Traditionally, English novelists complicate the protagonist’s battle to establish an individual identity with conflicts from outside the self. German novelists typically concentrate on the internal struggle of the hero. The protagonist’s adventures can be seen as a quest for the meaning of life or as a vehicle for the author’s social and moral opinions as demonstrated through the protagonist.



The Bildungsroman was especially popular until 1860. Its German affiliation, however, caused anti-German sentiment during the world wars to contribute to the demise of its influence, along with the emergence of a multitude of modern experiments in novel writing. Nonetheless, James Joyce wrote his Bildungsroman, *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, in 1916, and the genre has continued to be adopted, with distinguishing variations, by writers of many nationalities.

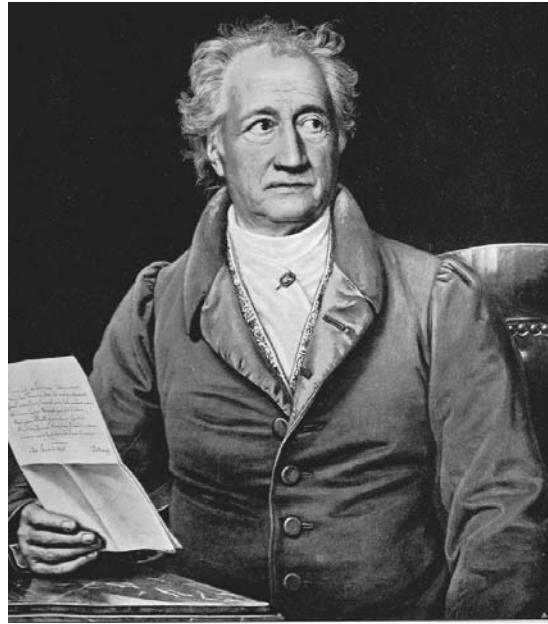
REPRESENTATIVE AUTHORS

Charlotte Brontë (1816–1855)

Charlotte Brontë was born in Yorkshire, England, on April 21, 1816, the third of six children. Her two older sisters died in childhood, and Brontë became very close to her remaining younger siblings, brother Branwell and sisters Emily and Anne. In 1846, Brontë and her sisters published a collection of poetry under the pseudonyms Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell, and although the collection was not well received by critics and readers, the three women continued to write. By 1849, Brontë had lost her three beloved siblings—Branwell from complications of heavy drinking, and Emily and Anne to tuberculosis. Her writing career, however, was taking off with the success of *Jane Eyre* (1847), an excellent example of the female Bildungsroman. She married Arthur Bell Nichols, her father's curate, in June 1854 and died less than a year later, on March 31, 1855, either from tuberculosis or from complications caused by pregnancy.

Charles Dickens (1812–1870)

One of the greatest British writers of all time, Charles Dickens was a Victorian novelist who chose the Bildungsroman form for at least two of his most famous works: *David Copperfield* (1849–1850) and *Great Expectations* (1860–1861). Born in Portsmouth, England, on February 7, 1812, Dickens grew up in London. His father was a navy clerk who went to debtors' prison when Dickens was twelve. Forced to go to work in a shoe dye factory, Dickens lived alone in fear and shame. These feelings led to the creation of his many orphan characters and his sympathy for the plight of the working class that made him the first great urban novelist. Although he was able to return to school and eventually clerked in a law firm, Dickens found



Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe (Time & Life Pictures / Mansell / Getty Images)

his first success as a journalist and comic writer of the *Pickwick Papers* (1836–1837). However, his deep social concerns found expression in a rich intensity and variety in his later works. By the time of his death from a paralytic stroke at age 58 on June 9, 1870, Dickens had written many novels, including *A Christmas Carol*, *Oliver Twist*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832)

Born on August 28, 1749, in Frankfurt, Germany, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe became one of Europe's most well-known and versatile writers. Noted for his lyrical poetry, his influential novels, and his dramatic poem *Faust*, Goethe also made substantial contributions in the fields of biology, music, and philosophy. He wrote the first comprehensive history of science. In 1795, he published *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, a novel that is considered a prime example of the Bildungsroman. In addition, Goethe profoundly affected the growth of literary Romanticism and introduced the novella. He died in Weimar on March 22, 1832, at the age of eighty-two.

James Joyce (1882–1941)

As a poet and novelist, James Joyce brought marked change to modern literature. Born in

Dublin, Ireland, on February 2, 1882, Joyce moved frequently as a child because of his father's drinking and financial difficulties. Joyce's classic Künstlerroman (novel of an artist's development), *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, portrays a hero who is a character blend of Joyce and his father. Despite the Joyce family situation, the novelist received a good education at a Jesuit school. But like his hero in *A Portrait*, Joyce later rejected religion, family, and his home country, living most of his life on the European continent. However, he wrote almost exclusively about Dublin. Joyce felt that being an artist required exile to protect oneself from sentimental involvements and that he could not write about Dublin with integrity and objectivity unless he went away. *A Portrait* established the modern concept of the artist as a bohemian who rejects middle-class values. It also set the example for a number of modern Irish Bildungsromans in which heroes achieve their quest when they come to believe that alienation from society, not finding one's place in the social order, is the mark of maturity. Joyce died in Zurich on January 13, 1941, when he was only 59 years old, but his innovations in literary organization and style, particularly his use of stream-of-consciousness technique, secured his unique place in the development of the novel.

Thomas Mann (1875–1955)

Considered the leading German novelist of the twentieth century, Thomas Mann was born in northern Germany on June 6, 1875. However, after 1933, he lived in either Switzerland or the United States because of his opposition to the Nazis. By then he had already won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1929. His masterpiece, *The Magic Mountain* (*Der Zauberberg*), was written in 1924 and is a Bildungsroman, as is a later work, *Doctor Faustus* (1947). The overall theme of Mann's works is the breakdown of civilization. Mann presents this theme in *The Magic Mountain* through a story about the patients in a Swiss sanatorium. *Doctor Faustus* is a Künstlerroman in which the protagonist is an artist who makes a pact with the devil to achieve creative vitality. The story ends tragically and parallels Germany's pact with Hitler to restore national vitality that ends in destruction. Mann died of phlebitis near Zurich on August 12, 1955.

Sylvia Plath (1932–1963)

Sylvia Plath was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on October 27, 1932. She lost her father shortly

after her eighth birthday, an event and a relationship that proved a strong influence in her life and work. Plath showed early interest in writing, keeping a journal beginning at the age of 11. Plath was an ambitious poet but suffered from depression and suicidal tendencies. After graduating from Smith College in 1955, Plath attended Cambridge University on a Fulbright scholarship. At Cambridge, Plath met poet Ted Hughes and the two were married in 1956. Their relationship was tumultuous, as documented in their poetry and letters. They had two children together before separating in late 1962. A few months later, on February 11, 1963, Plath committed suicide. Although she had published only a handful of books during her lifetime, Hughes—who was still legally Plath's husband—edited and posthumously published Plath's large amount of previously unpublished poetry and letters. She is known as a poet of the Confessional generation. Her semi-autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar* is a Bildungsroman, although it does not closely follow all of the usual Bildungsroman conventions.

Mark Twain (1835–1910)

Mark Twain is known as one of America's leading realists, native humorists, and local colorists. He was a master in the use of folklore, psychological realism, and dialects. Born Samuel Langhorne Clemens in Florida, Missouri, on November 30, 1835, he died of heart disease in the city he had long made his home, Hartford, Connecticut, on April 21, 1910. Twain produced not one but several classics, including what some believe to be the greatest American novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), a picaresque and satirical Bildungsroman. Probably more than any other writer, Mark Twain provided a uniquely American, and usually comic, portrayal of the Bildungsroman hero. Sadly, Twain's satire became bitter as his personal tragedies and financial reverses led to the disillusionment and depression that cloud his later writings.

Christoph Martin Wieland (1733–1813)

Whenever the Bildungsroman is discussed, Christoph Martin Wieland, who was born in Germany on September 5, 1733, is mentioned as the writer of *The History of Agathon*, the precursor novel to Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. A translator whose work reflects the Enlightenment, the early eighteenth-century period also known as the Age of Reason, and

whose style shows rococo influences, Wieland translated twenty-two plays by Shakespeare into German (1762–1766) and also translated the classical writings of Horace and Lucian. Many of Wieland's own writings are set in Greece, including his *Die Geschichte des Agathon* (1766–1767, translated into English as *The History of Agathon* [1773]). In an early instance of publishing German literary periodicals, Wieland edited the journal *Der deutsche Merkur* (*The German Mercury*). Wieland died on January 21, 1813.

REPRESENTATIVE WORKS

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

Mark Twain's novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was published in 1884 in England and Canada and in the United States a few months later, in 1885. Like the Bildungsroman hero, Huck leaves home to find an independent life, has a surrogate father in Jim, is in conflict with his society, and reaches maturity when he repents his treatment of Jim and puts fairness and friendship over expected behavior.

Though considered by some to be a masterpiece of American literature, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* initially scandalized reviewers and parents who thought it would corrupt young children with its depiction of a hero who lies, steals, and uses coarse language. In the last half of the twentieth century, the condemnation of the book continued on the grounds that its portrayal of Jim and use of the word "nigger" are racist. While some justify the book as a documentation of the racial notions prevalent at the time of its writing, the novel continues to appear on some lists of books banned in schools across the United States.

The Bell Jar

Although Sylvia Plath is well known as a poet, her autobiographical Bildungsroman is one of the best-known works in modern American literature. Published in 1963, *The Bell Jar* tells the story of Esther Greenwood, a student editor on an internship at a women's magazine in New York City. It follows the standard Bildungsroman pattern of the young person who goes to the big city to pursue professional aspirations. But there is no traditional happy ending. The psychological anguish of Plath's later poetry is related to the confessional revelations of *The*

Bell Jar, in which she describes the events that led to her nervous breakdown. One month after the English publication of this book in 1963 under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas, Plath committed suicide. The novel was published in England under Plath's name in 1966 and in the United States in 1971.

Great Expectations

Great Expectations, published serially in 1860 and 1861 by Charles Dickens, follows the tradition of the Bildungsroman. The young protagonist, Pip, leaves his rural home to become a gentleman and win the girl of his dreams. While most Bildungsroman heroes have to make their own way, Pip has a mysterious benefactor who provides the wealth that Pip thinks will make him happy. However, in the course of finding his true values, Pip comes to realize that happiness comes not from money but from the appreciation of good friends, regardless of their social status, and from personal integrity. This novel has become an all-time classic that is still required reading in many high school curricula.

Invisible Man

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* was published in 1952 and won the 1953 National Book Award. Ellison's first novel, it expresses in metaphorical language the Bildungsroman theme of searching for one's identity. The nameless black protagonist, looking for his identity, comes to the realization that he has been living the roles prescribed for him by white society. But once he steps outside the assigned sphere, he becomes "invisible" to a dominant culture that does not recognize his individuality. Employing symbols of the traditions of the frontier, the black community, and music, *Invisible Man* achieved international fame and remains one of the most important American works of the twentieth century.

Jane Eyre

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, published in 1847, is one of the first Bildungsromans with a female protagonist. In this Victorian English novel, the female hero is constrained by social expectations determined by gender-specific beliefs. At age ten, Jane is sent to residential school where she acquires skills she later uses as a governess and a village schoolteacher. In its use of natural elements and the supernatural, the novel is both romantic and Gothic. *Jane Eyre* is a Bildungsroman in that it traces Jane's development

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS



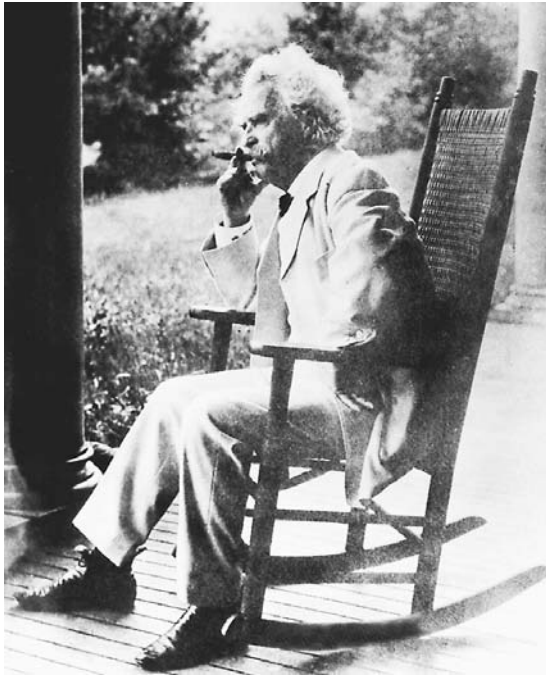
- Image Entertainment produced James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in 1979 and released it on video in 2000. It starred Bosco Hogan and Sir John Gielgud.
- *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* can also be found on a Blackstone Audiobooks recording made in 1995 and read by Frederick Davidson. It is ten hours long.
- There are several film versions of *Jane Eyre*. A recent A & E Entertainment adaptation of the Charlotte Brontë book, starring Samantha Morton and Ciaran Hinds, was released on video in 1998. The 1944 production from Twentieth Century Fox starred Orson Welles, Joan Fontaine, and Margaret O'Brien and departed significantly from the novel.
- *Jane Eyre* is also available as an audio book from Audiobooks.com. Read by Maureen O'Brien, it is over twenty-one hours long. Another recording, done by Blackstone Audiobooks in 1994, is nineteen hours long and is read by Nadia May.
- Blackstone Audiobooks produced *Jude the Obscure* in 1997. Read by Frederick Davidson, it is sixteen hours long.
- Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* was recorded as an unabridged audio book in 2001 by Audiobooks.com. It is six hours in length and read by Joe Morton.
- One of many versions of Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* was produced in 1999 by WGBH Boston Video. It is three hours long on a two-tape set and stars Ioan Gruffudd, Justine Waddell, and Charlotte Rampling.
- *Great Expectations* is also available as an audio book from a several distributors. Audible.com has a 1987 production, narrated by Frank Muller, which runs for sixteen hours and forty minutes. Blackstone Audiobooks carries a nineteen-hour, thirty-minute version read by Frederick Davidson.
- The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) produced a four-part miniseries of Brontë's *Jane Eyre* in 2007. Directed by Susanna White, it stars Ruth Wilson as Jane and Toby Stephens as Rochester. This miniseries was released on DVD by Masterpiece Theater in 2007.
- A biographical film about Plath's life, *Sylvia* was released in 2003, starring Gwyneth Paltrow and Daniel Craig and directed by Christine Jeffs. Frieda Hughes, daughter of Plath and Hughes, famously denounced the film and its makers, claiming that they only sought to profit from her mother's death. As of 2008, *Sylvia* was available on DVD from Universal Studios.

from a dependent child to a mature and independent woman. The novel dramatizes the love affair between Jane and Edward Rochester, who is married at the time they meet. Rochester keeps his insane wife sequestered in his estate, and after she dies, he and Jane marry. Charlotte Brontë was attracted to the married headmaster of the school in Brussels where she went to study French and to teach in 1842–1843. This unhappy experience, along with the author's memories of early school years at Cowan's

Bridge, contributed autobiographical elements to *Jane Eyre*, her first published work of fiction, which was an immediate success.

Jude the Obscure

Thomas Hardy introduced into Victorian literature the concept of fatalism. This belief assumes that humans are subject to arbitrary and random forces, such as chance and timing, which shape their destinies. *Jude the Obscure*, published in 1895, received widespread criticism because it



Mark Twain (AP Images)

attacks the Anglican Church, the elitist admissions policies of Oxford University (called Christminster in the novel), and the rigid laws regarding marriage. As a Bildungsroman, the maturation story follows Jude Fawley's route to destruction from what Hardy called in his preface "the tragedy of unfulfilled aims." Fawley, by trade a stonemason, has spiritual and intellectual ambitions that are thwarted by his exclusion from the university and his disastrous involvement with two women, the vulgar Arabella and the intellectual Sue. He marries the first and has one child with her; he does not marry the second, and he has two children by her. Tragedy overwhelms Jude when his oldest child kills the younger ones and hangs himself. Jude himself dies miserably, an alcoholic.

Of Human Bondage

Like so many autobiographical Bildungsromans, *Of Human Bondage* (1915) draws from the unhappy early years of its author, W. Somerset Maugham. A popular twentieth-century English novelist, Maugham was a physician who abandoned medicine to write plays and novels. The hero in Maugham's most famous novel is a medical student with a clubfoot who falls in love with a promiscuous Cockney

waitress. A still-admired The famous 1935 film version of this obsessive and tragic love affair starred Bette Davis and Leslie Howard.

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

James Joyce's masterpiece is *Ulysses*, but his autobiographical Bildungsroman is *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, published in 1916. When Joyce's hero Stephen Dedalus grows up, he says farewell to his home country and to his family and religion as well. The *Norton Anthology of English Literature* describes this novel as portraying "the parallel movement toward art and toward exile." This novel of rebellion insists that the artist is an outcast and that his alienation is a necessary component of his being creative.

Sons and Lovers

Another autobiographical Bildungsroman, *Sons and Lovers* was D. H. Lawrence's third and most notable novel. Published in 1913, it is the coming-of-age story of Paul Morel, the son of a coal miner father and a controlling and ambitious mother who gives up on finding any fulfillment in her marriage. She turns her possessive attention to her children, especially Paul. The resulting struggle for sexual power and individual identity causes Paul difficulties in finding his professional place and establishing a healthy relationship with a woman his own age. This novel dramatizes some of the psychological points Freud explored under the label Oedipus complex.

Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship

Published in 1795 by Wolfgang von Goethe as *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, this prototype of the Bildungsroman was translated into English by Thomas Carlyle in 1824. With this book, Goethe established the Bildungsroman as a novel of personal rather than philosophical development for the main character. His hero wanders through a series of love affairs, friendships, and occupations before settling down to marriage and responsible adulthood. Goethe's model was emulated by many notable writers and has had a strong influence on the development of the novel.

THEMES

Coming of Age and Apprenticeship

Goethe's Bildungsroman appropriately uses the word "apprenticeship" in its title because one

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY



- Among the books that you have read, is there one that you think would fit in the Bildungsroman classification? Explain why it is a Bildungsroman, citing its characteristic features.
- Research the sociopolitical climate of Germany in 1795 and then describe how this climate may or may not have influenced the birth of the Bildungsroman genre.
- List several German authors and their works that continued the tradition of the Bildungsroman in their country in the nineteenth and/or twentieth centuries.
- Find an example of a Bildungsroman in a culture not traditionally associated with the genre, for example, a Japanese, Indian, or Chinese work, and explain how this work is a version of the Bildungsroman in that culture.
- Explain how the Bildungsroman is similar to a psychological novel or a picaresque. Provide definitions of the genres and give examples of representative works.

distinguishing factor of the genre is the learning process that brings the protagonist from childhood into adulthood. As a coming-of-age novel, the Bildungsroman focuses on the main character's apprenticeship. These experiences place the character near older practitioners whose roles as models the character either emulates or rejects.

Education

The Bildungsroman is a novel of formation or development. These terms imply that the Bildungsroman is also a novel about education, yet not necessarily in the narrow sense of the Erziehungsroman (novel of educational development). Life is an education, and the process of growing up as chronicled in the Bildungsroman is a series of experiences that teach lessons. The protagonist's education may be academic; it

may also be in other areas, such as learning social graces, conducting business affairs, and gaining integrity in relationships.

Identity and the Self

The protagonist of the Bildungsroman has a unique talent. Part of the maturation process requires discovering this talent and figuring out how to use it. The journey and experiences of the hero are intended to provide an opportunity to examine the inner self and clarify important goals and how to pursue them. As part of the self-discovery, the hero gets a new perspective on his/her relationships with other people. In other words, facing the complexities of the adult world causes the protagonist to learn about others and about himself. Thus, the Bildungsroman is a psychological novel in which the main character evolves toward mature self-awareness.

Journey

In Bildungsromans the hero leaves home on a journey or quest. Usually, the protagonist leaves a rural setting to travel into the wider world of the city. In this way, the character encounters a larger society that tests his or her mettle. The physical journey initiates change, and change brings growth.

Love

Finding the right love is a component of the quest as it is enacted in the Bildungsroman. The movement into adulthood begins with separation and often resolves in maturity with adult connection. In some cases the character must negotiate among potential partners in order to discover the appropriate one. The formalization of that relationship may constitute the final event in the novel.

Search for the Meaning of Life

In the Bildungsroman, the novel of development, the hero develops through experiences that assist in clarifying the character's mature values. Growing up involves the search for universal truths. For Victorians, the universal truths concerned achieving middle-class values, marrying, and settling down as a responsible citizen. But to writers like Joyce, these truths concerned the artist's alienation and the necessary rejection of middle-class values.

STYLE

Audience

The Bildungsroman does not just tell a story. It involves the reader in the same process of education and development as the main character. The aim is to affect the reader's personal growth as well. However, at some point in the narrative, the reader may be in disagreement with the protagonist. Realizing that the hero has made a mistake in judgment, the reader, in effect, learns from the situation before the protagonist or otherwise compares his/her own morality against the moral of the story that the hero eventually learns.

Character

In the Bildungsroman, the focus is on one main character. The structure of the Bildungsroman is to follow this one character from youth to adulthood. Other characters exist in the story, of course, but only in roles that have some kind of tie or relationship that contributes to the growth and development of the protagonist. With this concentration, it is then possible for the reader to become engrossed in the maturation process of the hero and learn the same life lessons.

Chronicle

A Bildungsroman is the chronicle, or record of events, of the protagonist from youth to adulthood. However, it is not an unbiased record, but more like a diary recording the life of a young person on the way to self-understanding and maturity. Consequently, the Bildungsroman uses a chronological time period to follow the hero from year to year.

Conflict

Growing up and finding one's purpose in life is difficult. There are many pitfalls, mistakes, and forces beyond one's control along the way. These conflicts between the protagonist and fate, or nature, or others, or self are part of the process of maturation that the Bildungsroman chronicles. Each crisis the hero endures helps to deepen his self-knowledge and strengthen or challenge his moral fortitude. Multiple conflicts are essential to the credibility of the Bildungsroman as a reflection of the real life experience.

Dialogue

Dialogue is the conversational interaction among the characters of a story. Since the Bildungsroman is focused on the main character, plot and

narrative are secondary to dialogue. Using dialogue to carry the story makes the reader feel more of a witness to an actual scene. The reader knows little more than the hero has learned from talking with others and thus makes the same discoveries as the protagonist as events happen.

MOVEMENT VARIATIONS

American Novels

The American style of the Bildungsroman is a combination of the German Bildungsroman and the Spanish picaresque. The American Bildungsroman follows the pattern of moral growth for the protagonist as he discovers his identity in conflict with social norms. Blended into the story is the picaresque element of the hero being as a traveler who has an outsider's perspective on what he encounters. Two American classics exemplify this structure: Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*.

Picaresque

A picaresque novel, which is Spanish in origin, is a humorous tale about the adventures of a roguish hero. The first known picaresque was the anonymously published novel *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554). The popularity of picaresque novels spread to Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as exemplified by classics such as Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722).

English Novels

In an English Bildungsroman, the protagonist is often a poor orphaned boy whose goal is to become a cultured gentleman of means. As part of his self-education, he moves from his provincial home to an urban setting. While the German Bildungsroman emphasizes internal conflicts within the main character, the English Bildungsroman uses the outside world to threaten the hero's quest for identity. Many English Bildungsromans draw from the author's own experience.

Entwicklungsroman

Another name for Bildungsroman is the general term Entwicklungsroman, or novel of development. This name applies to novels constructed to follow the personality development of the protagonist. However, it is sometimes reserved for only those works that describe the hero's physical passage from youth to maturity without

delving into his psychological progress. In other words, Bildungsroman-type novels that pay less attention to the hero's intellect and emotions than more fully developed works fit into the category of Entwicklungsroman.

Erziehungsroman

Meaning "novel of education," this variation is a more pedagogic form of the Bildungsroman. Not only is it more concerned with the formal education and training of the protagonist, but the novel also intends to teach certain lessons about values to the reader as well.

Female Protagonist

The female protagonist of a Bildungsroman encounters problems specific to growing up female in a male-dominated world. Early female Bildungsromans with female protagonists mostly follow the traditional pattern that the mature female sees marriage as her fulfillment. Intellectual and social development is often achieved through the mentorship of a knowledgeable and sophisticated man. In some early nineteenth-century female Bildungsromans, the female's education occurs through an older and wiser husband. Later novels portray women entering marriage as the culmination of the mutual growth that occurs in a loving relationship.

While a male protagonist in a Bildungsroman may meet his pivotal crisis in the course of his professional career, the female protagonist's turning point may result from a romantic entanglement. Her journey of discovery may be more internal, or psychological, than that of her male counterpart.

Künstlerroman

This form of the Bildungsroman focuses on the development of the artist. In this case, the protagonist achieves a place and opportunity in which to practice his or her art. Thus, graduating from apprenticeship not only ends the formative stage of life but also establishes the destiny that the hero has sought. Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and Thomas Mann's *Dr. Faustus* are examples of this type.

Medical Subgenre

As defined by Anne Hudson Jones for *Lancet*, in this subgenre

... a young physician, often but not always an intern or resident, sets out to find his special

calling and to master his craft. Whether he journeys from city to city or from rotation to rotation within the same hospital, his quest is the same.

Two examples of this subgenre are Sinclair Lewis's *Arrowsmith* and Samuel Shem's *The House of God*.

Military Subgenre

In this variation of the Bildungsroman, the protagonist enters the military as a young man. His path of discovery causes him to leave home, not necessarily for a city but for wherever the military sends him. Through the rigors of training and combat, the hero is challenged not only to find himself as a person but to find out how good he is as a soldier.

Social Protest Subgenre

The Bildungsroman may be a work of social protest when its female or male hero is a dispossessed or marginalized person. The female Bildungsroman may concern itself with gender issues in a patriarchal society, as in *Jane Eyre*. In other cases Bildungsromans explore the difficulties of growing up as a member of a minority group and may involve the fight for civil rights. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* belongs to this group. Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* combine female and minority issues interwoven in works of social protest.

Zeitroman

This variation of the Bildungsroman blends the development of the era in which the hero lives with his or her personal development. The protagonist thus serves as a reflection of his or her times. This type of novel provides an interesting study of the effects of historical context on character. For example, Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* dramatizes the effects of being a Civil War soldier on the protagonist.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Development of the Novel

Beginning in the early eighteenth century, long narratives began to be written in prose. The modern novel developed in England with Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Moll Flanders* (1722). These works were followed shortly by Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1700–1800s:** Christoph Martin Wieland and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe develop the Bildungsroman, but the novel is still in its infancy as a literary form until the 1800s, when it begins to be used widely in Germany. The genre also includes some of the finest works of English, French, and American authors such as Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, Thomas Hardy, Gustave Flaubert, Mark Twain, and Kate Chopin.

1900s–Today: Continuing as a relevant genre for novelists, Bildungsromans are written by English-speaking authors such as James Joyce, W. Somerset Maugham, D. H. Lawrence, J. D. Salinger, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, Philip Roth, and Alice Walker.

- **1700–1800s:** As a sign of maturity, the traditional male protagonist in the Bildungsroman is a person who finds his place in society and takes a responsible role in society.

1900s–Today: As a sign of maturity, the modern protagonist is just as likely to reject society and live in isolation as to accept a role in the mainstream.

- **1700–1800s:** Bildungsromans with female protagonists slowly begin to appear, but the heroine is restricted by the domestic parameters of the times and seeks her education through a knowledgeable man and marriage.

1900s–Today: Female protagonists in the Bildungsroman gain the freedom to explore various paths to self-discovery and may find fulfillment outside the home and marriage.

Henry Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (1747). These novels were highly episodic plot-driven stories. In Germany in 1766–1767, Wieland wrote *The History of Agathon*, the first example of a Bildungsroman. Then in 1795, Goethe produced *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. The term Bildungsroman was coined in 1817 by Karl von Morgenstern but not commonly applied until about 1870. The genre flourished through the middle decades of the nineteenth century, both in England and the United States. The historical novel, developed by Sir Walter Scott, was written also by Dickens and others. The popularity of the Bildungsroman genre waned in the early twentieth century, but variations of the form continued to be written throughout the twentieth century.

Cultural Climate

In 1789, the French Revolution began, followed by the Reign of Terror from 1793 to 1794 and the Napoleonic period from 1804 until 1815. In 1798 in England, Wordsworth and Coleridge published *Lyrical Ballads*, the preface to which

marked a literary watershed that came to be known as the beginning of the Romantic period. The Victorian Age spanned the years of Queen Victoria's reign, from 1837 to her death in 1901. The era of greatest popularity for the Bildungsroman, the nineteenth century, thus spanned the Romantic and Victorian periods in literature. This time of economic and political turbulence saw repeated wars in Europe and social and mechanical transformations wrought by the Industrial Revolution. Germany got its first constitution in 1816. At the same time that several European countries strengthened their colonial territories.

According to the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, perceptive Victorians suffered from a sense of "being displaced persons in a world made alien by technological changes which had been exploited too quickly for the adaptive powers of the human psyche." With the Industrial Revolution came the rise of the middle class that gradually took control of the means of production, especially in England and the United States. Many middle-class Victorians

wanted the stability of a set of rules to live by. Readers demanded guidance and edification from literature. The Bildungsroman, noted for exemplifying middle-class standards, met their needs. Often times, its hero went from the lower working class to respectability as a gentleman. Along the way, he reviewed his values and usually concluded that a settled middle-class lifestyle was the best choice.

By the end of the Victorian period, writers were seeking more realism. Victorian values and self-assurance gave way to pessimism and stoicism. The French promoted a bohemian lifestyle that scoffed at notions of respectability. Novelists began experimenting with the time structure of their works, and stream-of-consciousness began to be written. As a genre so tied to convention, German influence, and orderly chronology, the Bildungsroman lost popularity as twentieth-century literary interests and innovations led elsewhere. Still, James Joyce chose the Bildungsroman form for his masterpiece *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in 1916, and the genre is still popular.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Regarding Bildungsromans, critics discuss whether novels other than the German ones written in the strict tradition of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* qualify as examples of the genre. Purists argue that the Bildungsroman is so intertwined with German philosophical and literary heritage that the form does not occur in other languages. Others find common elements in many novels.

It is commonly held that Goethe's novel had widespread influence. For example, Ehrhard Bahr wrote for the *Reference Guide to World Literature*:

Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship had a great influence on the Romantics and the history of the German novel. It provided, so to speak, the blueprint for all subsequent German novels. Early commentaries on the novel occur in correspondence between Friedrich Schiller and Goethe, in the letters by Wilhelm von Humboldt and Christian Gottfried Körner, and in Friedrich Schlegel's 1798 essay "On Goethe's *Meister*." Goethe's novel became a prime example of Romanticism.

Thomas Carlyle, a highly influential British historian, writer, and social critic, thought so



Illustration by Frederic W. Pailthorpe from *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens (Pailthorpe, Frederic W., illustrator. From *Great Expectations*, by Charles Dickens. Dodd, Mead & Company, 1942)

much of Goethe's Bildungsroman that he translated the work in 1824 and also wrote a parody of it. After Carlyle, other English writers took up the genre. The great twentieth-century German novelist, Thomas Mann, also wrote a Bildungsroman (*The Magic Mountain*) and considered Goethe's novel one of the three greatest events of that era alongside the French Revolution and publication of Fichte's *Theory of Science*. Without doubt, it was a popular form of the novel in the nineteenth century, but when World War I began and critics continued to link the genre to the German tradition, it faded in popularity.

Two studies of the Bildungsroman are Martin Swales's *The German Bildungsroman from Wieland to Hesse* and Jerome Hamilton Buckley's *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding*. The first book argues that the genre is purely German; the second book finds a number of Bildungsromans in English literature. The contrast between these two important critical works summarizes the debate over the Bildungsroman. Those who believe that the genre is used in other cultures often re-

examine novels classified under other genres to prove the influence of the Bildungsroman on structure. Regarding the genre, critics analyze Scott's *Waverly*, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, and Plath's *The Bell Jar*. Some critics assign particular books to the genre; others specify subgenre based on certain characteristics—comic, female, black, Chicano, etc. Others debate whether early female bildungsroman can be called feminist. In an 1995 article for *Essays in Literature*, Denise Kohn argues that Jane Austen's novel *Emma* is, in fact, a Bildungsroman because the titular character learns to grow into her role as a lady. *Emma* is also a feminist novel because Austen's notions about what traits define ladyship emphasize intelligence and compassion over passivity.

Bernard Selinger, in a 1999 article for *Modern Fiction Studies*, says that the Bildungsroman continues to interest both authors and critics. In his opinion, critics of the genre tend to move between seeing the genre as concerned with the integration of the hero into society or with regarding the hero as alienated. This kind of criticism reflects the flexibility of the genre in the hands of skilled novelists throughout the literary world who know that each person's development has its own outcome.

CRITICISM

Lois Kerschen

Kerschen is a freelance writer and the director of a charitable foundation for children. In this essay, Kerschen counters the argument that the Bildungsroman is strictly a German form of the novel by citing examples of the genre written in other languages.

Repeatedly, the Bildungsroman is defined as a "German" form of the novel. Without doubt, the genre originated in Germany and became commonly used in that country. However, for some critics to maintain that the genre is still predominantly, if not exclusively, German defies logic. Martin Swales, an oft-quoted authority on the Bildungsroman, says in his book *The German Bildungsroman from Wieland to Hesse* that "The Bildungsroman, both in theory and in practice, is little known outside Germany." Hans Eichner remarks in his "Reflection and Action: Essays on the Bildungsroman" that this collection "very strongly suggests that the term 'Bildungsroman'

WHAT DO I STUDY NEXT?



- The Bildungsroman is popularly used in Science Fiction, especially perhaps in young adult Science Fiction. For example, Orson Scott Card, famous author of juvenile books, wrote the Bildungsroman *Ender's Game*, which is also classified as a military Bildungsroman. The book demonstrates the application of a long-standing genre to futuristic stories.
- Just as there is a category for black Bildungsroman, there are books such as Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* that are classified as Chicano Bildungsromans. Also qualifying as a female Bildungsroman, selections from this book can often be found in high school literature texts. *The House on Mango Street* is worthy of study as another use of the Bildungsroman in a culture other than German or British.
- The picaresque novel is one of the oldest forms of the novel. *Don Quixote*, written by Miguel de Cervantes in 1605, and *Huckleberry Finn* can be classified in both categories, picaresque and Bildungsroman. Study the picaresque to learn about this other quest genre.
- Geta LeSeur's book *Ten Is the Age of Darkness* compares the Bildungsroman as used by African-American authors to that of African West Indian authors. LeSeur finds that African-American Bildungsromans concentrate on protest whereas the West Indies Bildungsromans depict the simplicity and innocence of childhood even under the difficult circumstances of poverty. This book and the novels it describes give insight into the unique experience of children of color even as they establish the commonality of the coming-of-age experience for all people.

is useful only when it is applied to the relatively small number of novels that are clearly in the tradition of *Wilhelm Meister*."



AMONG MODERN NOVELS, THE VARIETY THAT CAN BE CLASSIFIED AS BILDUNGSROMANS SEEMS ENDLESS. . . . NO DOUBT EXAMPLES COULD BE FOUND IN NEARLY EVERY CULTURE IN THE WORLD. OF COURSE, THERE WOULD BE DIFFERENCES UNIQUE TO EACH CULTURE AND TIME PERIOD, BUT THE BASIC CONCEPT OF THE BILDUNGSROMAN IS EVERYONE'S STORY."

In fact, the term Bildungsroman is applied to many novels. While it is not a dominant genre, it has a universal appeal because it deals with the universal experience of growing up. The quest to become a responsible adult and find one's place in the world is so difficult that readers have sustained interest in this topic. Following the difficulties of the protagonist in a Bildungsroman, readers trace the arduous journey toward maturity and learn from the growth process observed in the text.

As every student of literature learns, a well-written story has certain basic elements: plot, character, point of view, setting, tone, and style. Any one of these elements can be emphasized over the others. In the case of the Bildungsroman, character is the primary focus. Furthermore, the structure of the story tends to follow the standard pattern: introduction, rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement. Along the way, the reader can expect the characters to show some development. If they do, they are dynamic, or round; if they do not, they are static, or flat. What distinguishes the Bildungsroman from other novels is the concentration on the development of the main character from youth to adulthood. This focus makes the genre distinctive yet connected to many variations written in other languages. Despite particular debates on the genre definition, many agree that the term Bildungsroman can be applied to novels of development.

In Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1849) and *Great Expectations* (1861), the protagonists are self-educated orphans who head to

London with the goal of becoming gentlemen. The Victorian middle-class work ethic demanded that the hero learn a trade and earn his way to success. Dickens's Pip is an exception in that he has a benefactor and in that he rejects the expected lifestyle of marriage and success. The English Bildungsroman explores external and internal conflicts. George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss* (1860) and *Middlemarch* (1871), and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) dramatize the female quest for development in an oppressive environment.

In Ireland in 1916, James Joyce wrote the quintessential Künstlerroman in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The use of the Bildungsroman form continued among recent Irish writers as a political novel according to Kristen Morrison in "William Trevor," an article for the *Twayne's English Authors* series. Morrison says that William Trevor's *Fools of Fortune* (1983) and *Nights at the Alexandra* (1987), Brian Moore's *The Mangan Inheritance* (1979), and John Banville's *Birchwood* (1973) and *Mefisto* (1986) are all written in this bildungs/political mode. In the typical Bildungsroman, the hero reaches maturity when the character assumes a responsible role in society. However, in these Irish variations of the form which focus on a sociopolitical situation, "alienation, not integration, is the mark of [the protagonist's] hard-won maturity."

In the United States, Dickens's contemporary Mark Twain also made use of the Bildungsroman. James E. Caron, in an article for the *Modern Language Quarterly*, makes the case that three of Twain's works can be classified as comic Bildungsroman: *Old Times on the Mississippi*, *Roughing It*, and *Innocents Abroad*. Twain's masterpiece, *Huckleberry Finn*, is a picaresque Bildungsroman. In 1925, Joyce's contemporary Sinclair Lewis published *Arrowsmith*, a medical Bildungsroman, and won the Pulitzer Prize. Anne Hudson Jones says in "Images of Physicians in Literature: Medical bildungsromane" that "In the best tradition of the Bildungsroman, Arrowsmith's efforts to find his life's work include many false starts and much travel and relocation." Another famous American author, Philip Roth, repeatedly uses elements of the Bildungsroman, most notably in *The Ghost Writer* and in *Zuckerman Bound*. As with Twain works, these works are comic Bildungsromans.

The female Bildungsroman challenges the assumption that the protagonist is a male. After Jane Austen, the woman in a Victorian Bildungsroman faces new objectives and uses different strategies. Like their male counterparts, these protagonists express independent thought and seek to pursue their own talents. They may end up married, but sometimes pursuit of a partner confounds their development, as seems to be the case with Maggie Tulliver in *Mill on the Floss*.

In the hands of nineteenth-century American female novelists, the Bildungsroman continued to work within the bounds of social acceptability but gave the heroine even more liberties. A spinster could have a rewarding life. If marriage comes, it is after the establishment of independence. But the heroine grows up surrounded and protected by women, so reality was purposely skirted to provide a suitable environment for the ideas suggested in *Little Women*, *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, and *Five Little Peppers*. Then Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) defied convention and revealed the inner dissatisfaction and feeling of entrapment of a married woman. Among modern female Bildungsromans, all the limits are stretched and challenged. Two American novels, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*, are examples of the Bildungsroman format infused with unique feminine and modern questions.

The Bildungsroman is often a work of social protest because it privileges the experience of the outsider, the one who is marginalized and dispossessed. It tends to examine dominant culture from the point of view of one who is excluded or oppressed. Thus, as the protagonist struggles to claim identity and status in the context which denies that status, the reader has the opportunity to reevaluate the tacit assumptions of the majority. This reassessment takes place while the reader is invited by the text to identify with the one the society excludes. So the novel of protest locates the reader on the outside of the context the reader actually inhabits and this new location clarifies questions about social belief and assumption.

In the black Bildungsroman *Invisible Man* (1952), Ellison's protagonist comes to realize that he has no identity outside the white definition of who he is. At the same time, the reader gains insight into slavery and the dehumanizing effect of bigotry. Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) explore both feminist and minority issues.



A scene from a film production of The Bell Jar, based on the novel by Sylvia Plath (The Kobal Collection | The Picture Desk, Inc.)

Among modern novels, the variety that can be classified as Bildungsromans seems endless. For example, there are a multitude of interesting and popular works in Science Fiction. Other examples include works in the 1950s and 1960s from three French women novelists (Françoise Sagan, Françoise Mallet-Joris, and Claire Etcherrilli) and three Francophone African novels (Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* [1961], Camar Laye's *The Dark Child* [1953], and Mongo Beri's *Mission to Kala* [1957]). No doubt examples could be found in nearly every culture in the world. Of course, there would be differences unique to each culture and time period, but the basic concept of the Bildungsroman is everyone's story.

Source: Lois Kerschen, Critical Essay on the Bildungsroman, in *Literary Movements for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Denise Kohn

In this essay, Kohn argues that Jane Austen's novel Emma was written to be both entertaining and morally instructive. The article asserts that Emma becomes a lady through the course of the



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novel and that this makes the novel a domestic bildungsroman.

Emma can be a problematic novel for the modern reader—especially for the feminist reader. On the one hand, feminist critics have lauded Jane Austen for her critique of the marriage market and exposition of the problems of female independence in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Green, Johnson, Kirkham, Poovey). The growing emphasis on creating a canon of women writers has led many feminist readers to latch onto Austen with fervor because she is a woman writer who has long enjoyed a fine critical reputation despite the sentimental and damaging myth of “gentle-Janeism” (Trilling 29). On the other hand, feminist readers have also raised disturbing questions about Austen (Booth, Company 420). While Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar find that her novels are subversive in nature, they also believe that her novels depict “the necessity of female submission for female survival.”

Ironically, one way for the modern reader, feminist or not, to deal with the problems of reading *Emma* is to approach the novel as a lesson on manners—more specifically—as a lesson on “ladyhood.” Modern readers, of course are not usually interested in instruction on the characteristics of a “lady.” But this becomes a problem in reading Austen because she was writing to a population of readers in a time and a place for whom the attributes of a lady were important. Another problem in reading *Emma* is that modern readers often eschew didacticism in literature; Austen, however, expected that a novel could “gratify the cravings of the imagination and provide moral instruction” (Poovey 182). To do justice to Austen, modern readers must be willing to meet her at least halfway on her own territory. If readers are willing to extend

their hands to Austen—white gloves are not necessary—and politely pretend interest in the notion of “ladyhood,” then they may develop a fuller understanding of Austen as an artist. One of Austen’s greatest achievements in *Emma* is that she writes a novel of education—a bildungsroman—that instructs her readers to deconstruct the pervasive images of “ladyhood” created by her period’s conduct-book writers. Austen resists the view of a “lady” as passive and self-less and redefines the highest ideals of “ladyhood” as self-assurance, strength, and compassion through the depiction of her heroine, Emma. Such a reading of the novel, however, not only shows how *Emma* redefines female ideals but also how the novel redefines the bildungsroman within the context of early nineteenth-century domestic values.

In *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*, Mary Poovey defines the ideal lady in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as a “demure young woman, with eyes downcast and lips pressed into a faint and silent smile.” Both male and female authors of popular conduct books of the period define a lady primarily through what she must lack: personal agency, ambition, desire, and vanity (Poovey 4–36). Indeed, women’s self-denial and self-sacrifice were crucial elements in the emerging ideal of the Victorian house angel. While in the early eighteenth century a lady was defined as “a woman of superior position in society,” by the nineteenth century the term was used to denote a “woman whose manners, habits, and sentiments have the refinement characteristic of the higher ranks of society” (qtd. in Sangari, 715). In other words, the term “lady” moved from one that described only class to one that described behavior. In the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century world of a rising middle class and declining upper class, social status and survival often depended not only on money but also on manners—those culturally constructed markers that define community membership. The problems of shifting social classes exist even in *Emma*’s home of Highbury. The Coles and Mrs. Elton are purchasing prestige while Miss Bates, who as daughter of the former rector was a “fringe” member of the upper class, is losing prestige to poverty. During a period of what seemed like class chaos to many Britons, readers increasingly turned to the rising artistic form of the novel to find narrative guidance for their behavior.

While Emma at the beginning of the novel is a “lady” because her family as rural landowners are part of the upper class, it is not until the final part of the novel that she learns to balance power and propriety in order to better fulfill behavioral ideals of a “lady.” Emma, however, fulfills Austen’s artistic and social ideals—not the hegemonic ideals of the conduct-book authors. Austen’s novels and letters show her critique of a social system that required female subjection; even Wayne Booth believes that Austen “in her everyday life” believed that men and women were equal (Company 430). Indeed, the well-known portrait of Austen drawn by her sister offers visual evidence that Austen and her family did not subscribe to the narrow definitions of a “lady” celebrated by their culture: Austen is drawn with her arms folded assertively across her chest, looking off to the side with a serious look in her eyes and a stern set to her mouth. And as she herself was not portrayed as a “proper lady,” Austen in *Emma* never portrays her heroine as reflecting the image of the “lady” as passive and demure. Margaret Kirkham finds that Austen in *Emma* mirrors the Enlightenment feminist stance of Mary Wollstonecraft on male and female equality. Claudia Johnson believes the character of Emma “defies every dictum” about female deference preached by the conduct books. Katherine Sobba Green does not specifically discuss *Emma* but argues that Austen overturns the “tropic commodification” that defined women in the turn-of-the-century ritual of courtship and marriage. And although Poovey also does not discuss *Emma*, she believes that Austen’s later works emphasize the conflict between individual desire and social institutions. Austen, Poovey says, shows the danger of “unchecked individualism” and how the individual can both exist within and reform social institutions. So while the character of Emma is a celebration of female individualism and power, Austen also shows how Emma abuses her power by crossing the threshold of propriety and domesticity in her manipulation of Harriet and insensitivity to Miss Bates. By the end of the novel, however, Emma as a character is strengthened by her experience, gaining greater social and self-knowledge. As Austen’s portrait of an ideal “lady,” she is strong and assertive but is also more caring and sensitive to others.

The comic plot structure of *Emma* would also encourage readers to interpret the novel as a social lesson. Throughout the text, characters

are paired and re-paired as teachers and students. The story unfolds in the second paragraph of the novel as we learn about Emma’s loss of Miss Taylor, an “excellent woman as governess, who had fallen little short of a mother in affection.” But by the end of the second paragraph, we learn that Miss Taylor had ceased “to hold the nominal office of governess” to Emma long ago, and the two had lived together as “friend and friend.” Later in the novel, Knightley suggests that Emma, not Miss Taylor, was the real teacher of the two. The theme of education—and the decentering of authority—continues. Emma teaches Harriet. Harriet repeatedly teaches Emma, who is a slow learner, the dangers of teaching. Jane, who must become a governess, teaches Frank compassion. Frank asks Emma to choose and “educate” a wife for him. Of course, he does not know that Emma has already taken this project upon herself, and she does not know that Frank has already chosen his wife. Knightley and Emma both teach each other about social respect and kindness. She learns to appreciate Miss Bates and Robert Martin; he learns to appreciate Harriet. Mrs. Elton tries to teach Emma the role of the fashionable married woman and the importance of travel and barouche-landaus. And Mr. Woodhouse tries, vainly, to instruct everyone about the goodness of gruel.

The novel’s theme of education and development is also signified by *Emma*’s place within the genre of the bildungsroman. In nineteenth-century England, the bildungsroman, also called the novel of development or apprenticeship, was “frequently the equivalent of the Renaissance conduct book, insofar as one of its recurrent themes is the making of a gentleman,” writes Jerome Buckley in his influential study *The Season of Youth* (20). But in the case of *Emma*, which has a female protagonist, it is the making of a “lady” that becomes the recurrent theme. And though Buckley has been crucial in the definition of the English bildungsroman, ironically, he declares that *Emma* is not a bildungsroman. Buckley’s definition of the novel of development has been criticized as predominantly based upon male perspectives by feminist critics, who have worked to define the tradition of the female bildungsroman. And yet, many of the female paradigms for the genre do not precisely fit *Emma*, either. The main problem in recognizing *Emma* as a bildungsroman is that the genre has always been associated with the theme of the

journey or quest. And *Emma* is the antithesis of the novel of quest: it is a domestic novel.

Emma, then, can be considered a domestic bildungsroman, which in turn, makes it another possible paradigm for the female bildungsroman—especially those of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For most British and American women in these periods, especially those in the upper and middle classes, the domestic setting was the only one usually open for personal growth and development. The popular courtship novels of the period, which were often also domestic in their concerns, were part of a “social imperative to legitimize women’s self-actualization as affective individuals” (Green 14). The belief that women, and thus domestic novels about women, are not associated with development because they are framed by domesticity is part of a cultural hegemony that views male experience as normal and female experience as abnormal or Other. The use of male development as a standard to measure female development culminates in the theories of Freud, who defined women by their anatomical differences from men. Nancy Chodorow’s belief, however, that females usually develop through “relation and connection” to other people while males usually develop through separation has reshaped twentieth-century understanding of female development (qtd. in Gilligan, 7).

The psychological studies of Carol Gilligan, which support Chodorow’s theories of male and female development, can help to reshape an understanding of the bildungsroman. In *A Different Voice*, Gilligan explores differences in views of morality and the self, and the association of these different views with men and women in her studies of psychological development. While other psychologists, such as Freud, Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson, and Lawrence Kohlberg, have also found differences in male and female development that are similar to Gilligan’s findings, these psychologists have tended to describe male psychology as “normal” and female psychology as deviant (Gilligan 7–22). In her studies of women, Gilligan reshapes theories of human development by showing that women tend to view the world and their relationships as a web of interdependence, and men are more likely to view the world and relationships as a hierarchy. While men tend to define themselves through independence, women tend to define themselves through relationships (Gilligan 8). Gilligan’s comments about

the problems of an androcentric psychology in defining female development apply equally to the problems of an androcentric theory of the bildungsroman in defining the domestic novel of female development:

While the truths of psychological theory have blinded psychologists to the truth of women’s experience, that experience illuminates a world which psychologists have found hard to trace, a territory where violence is rare and relationships appear safe. The reason women’s experience has been so difficult to decipher or even discern is that a shift in the imagery of relationships [from hierarchy to web] gives rise to a problem of interpretation.

The domestic novel has been hard for many critics to read as a genuine novel of development because it often does depict a world where “violence is rare and relationships appear safe.” What seems to be the safety of the world of domesticity—compared to the world of the quest—has caused both male and female readers to dismiss the domestic setting. But heroines such as Emma do have to overcome obstacles in order to become adults, and these obstacles are often domesticated or different versions of those that heroes face on their quest for independence. The domestication of personal obstacles does not, however, make these obstacles any less real or less dangerous for the heroine. The text of the domestic novel simply places personal obstacles in a different context. It is also crucial to realize that the development of the domestic heroine differs from the development of the hero because female development is based upon a definition of self within a web of personal relationships. Although the domestic heroine must achieve intellectual independence and self-understanding to become an adult, she does not want to physically and emotionally sever herself from family and friends. Gilligan’s comments about the problems of female development apply as well to the problems of the domestic heroine, who must balance “the wish to be at the center of connection and the consequent fear of being too far out on the edge.” And, of course, the domestic setting itself is a web of personal connections in which relationships and the home have great value. As a result, the quest novel and the domestic novel are shaped by radically different codes. The hero of the quest wants to leave home to discover his true self; the heroine of domesticity does not want to leave because she wants to discover her true self within her home.

Gilligan's findings that women are more likely than men to view the world as a web of interdependence restructure the reader's understanding of Emma's devotion to her father and her hatred of travel, which is a domesticated version of the quest. The trip to Boxhill is, not surprisingly, a failure from the point of view of Emma, who as a domestic heroine, has little desire to leave her home or the community of Highbury. Emma also looks with derision at Mrs. Elton, who is associated with travel throughout the novel. Mrs. Elton instigates the trip to Boxhill, defines herself socially by a travelling coach, and suggests that Bath is the place to meet marriageable men. Austen herself is reputed to have disliked Bath intensely (Poovey 209–210, Kirkham 61–65), which increases the significance of her negative portrayal of Mrs. Elton, a Bath bride whose marriage is marked by monetary motives. Mrs. Elton, a woman who talks incessantly of travel, is used as a foil against the more domestic-centered Emma to exemplify silly pride and selfishness. Emma, too, may seem silly and selfish in the first volume of the novel, but Emma's character gains stature in comparison with Mrs. Elton because Emma's interests and values are firmly rooted within her own community.

The fact that Mrs. Elton lives in an ugly house while Emma lives in an attractive one also reflects both women's relationship to the opposition between travel and domesticity in the novel. Mrs. Elton cannot become the heroine of *Emma* because her love of ostentatious travel and her search for a husband outside her own community illustrate her lack of support for the domestic values which shape the novel. Mrs. Elton, though she is female, is an outsider and cannot understand the domestic code of Highbury and Hartfield, which values the home as the place of affection and happiness. The example of the Eltons is important because it illustrates that Austen does not characterize all people as following gender-based behavioral models. Within Highbury, both Knightley and Mr. Woodhouse share the domestic-based values found in Emma, Mrs. Weston, and Miss Bates. The Eltons, however, practice a sham domesticity based upon ostentation. They seek to prove their affection for one another and their home through unrestrained vanity and selfishness, constantly calling attention to themselves and their emotions. Augusta Elton can never fulfill Austen's ideals of a "lady" because she can never overcome her own individual selfishness. And while readers

frequently see Emma's devotion to her father as an example of society's restrictions on women and imply that Emma's decision to live at home after her marriage is a sign of her lack of growth, such criticism overlooks the importance of interdependence inherent in female development and the domestic novel. Such criticism is also part of a cultural definition of women that denigrates them because of their differences from men.

Reading *Emma* as a domestic bildungsroman is no longer difficult once cultural definitions of apprenticeship, work, and growth are broadened to include typical female experience as well as male experience. So while Buckley claims that *Emma* is not a bildungsroman, the novel actually fulfills most of his major criteria. *Emma* certainly fits Buckley's first characteristic of a bildungsroman: "A child of some sensibility grows up in the country or in a provincial town, where he finds constraints, social and intellectual, placed upon a free imagination" (Buckley 17). Emma is bored at the beginning of the novel; she is a "clever" young woman who is "in great danger of suffering from intellectual solitude." And like many characters in a bildungsroman, Emma rebels against authority. In the first chapter, she quietly but openly rejects the meek advice of her father and the stronger authority of Knightley, who warn her not to make any more matches after her successful pairing of Miss Taylor and Mr. Weston. Unlike the protagonists of most bildungsromane, however, Emma, does not leave home to learn in the city because the home is the setting of the domestic novel. But Emma does fit Buckley's next criterion because she experiences two love affairs, "one debasing, one exalting" that demand "the hero[ine] reappraise his [or her] values," as shown through her mistaken, humiliating love for Frank and her true, satisfying love for Knightley. The "search for a vocation" is also an important characteristic of the bildungsroman (Buckley 18) that is evident in Emma's development once readers expand their view of work from the traditional definition as "paid labor outside the home" to "unpaid labor inside the home." Emma's duties as a daughter and as the family manager are her work—and it is work that she refuses to reject or devalue at the end of the novel. Her marriage and her attempts to arrange other marriages are also significant aspects of her work within the community because marriage and motherhood were female careers during this period. While the modern

reader will find Austen's depictions of female work limiting, one must also remember that she was writing within the tradition of domestic realism. To have Emma assume work outside of traditional options for upper-class nineteenth-century women would have violated the qualifications of the domestic and realistic plot.

While *Emma* matches the significant characteristics of Buckley's definition of a bildungsroman, it also matches some crucial aspects of paradigms for the female bildungsroman. Annis Pratt notes that in the novel of development the young woman's tie to nature is important in her psychological growth. Throughout the novel, events and Emma's resulting moods are associated with nature. It suddenly snows, ruining a dinner party, the night Mr. Elton shocks Emma with his money-motivated marriage proposal. On the day Emma learns about Frank and Jane's engagement, the "weather added what it could of gloom" as a "cold stormy rain" destroys the natural beauty of July. The next day, however, "it was summer again"; significantly, this is also the day that Knightley proposes to Emma in the garden. "Never had the exquisite sight, smell, sensation of nature, tranquil, warm and brilliant after a storm, been more attractive to her," the narrator says. And though nature in Emma may sometimes be surprising, it is always the safe, domesticated nature of the English village, never the violent, raging nature of the gothic English moors.

The compound structure of Emma's last name—"Woodhouse"—and the link between "wood" and nature and between "house" and domesticity also mark the novel's link to the tradition of the bildungsroman and the domestic novel. The symbolic link between domesticity and nature in her surname is mirrored in the name of her home—Hartfield—which carries a double connotation as a natural place for deer and as a home of the heart. And as nature is domesticated in Emma, so is the archetypal role of the greenworld lover, who often plays a prominent role in the novel of female development (Pratt 22–29). Knightley, who is associated with farming and orchards, plays the role of Emma's greenworld lover, yet he is a domesticated version of the mythological Pan or Eros who usually endangers the female heroine (Pratt 22–24). Knightley's domesticated ties to nature make Emma's sexual growth safe within the novel. And as typical in many female bildungsromane, Emma's education culminates in a

personal epiphany instead of a progressive process of formal schooling. After she learns about Frank and Jane's engagement and Harriet's love for Knightley, Emma realizes that with "unpardonable arrogance" she had "proposed to arrange everybody's destiny." It is at this point in the novel that Emma learns one of the most valuable lessons of "ladyhood"—respect and care for other individuals.

In the beginning of the novel, Emma takes pride in the fact that she had helped to make a match between Miss Taylor and Mr. Weston. Although Knightley discredits her role, Emma explains that she has taken an appropriate middle-ground as matchmaker, "something between the do-nothing and the do-all." Her explanation of her role seems reasonable: she "promoted Mr. Weston's visits," gave many "little encouragements," and "smoothed many little matters." Emma's success as a matchmaker, however, leads her to abuse her power as she exchanges her role as social facilitator to become a social manipulator. She tries to realign Harriet's affections and soon believes she can judge everyone's true emotions. When she tries to be the "do-all" and force others to follow her own plans, Emma crosses the threshold of Austen's depiction of the ideal "lady." Her "kind designs" for Harriet lead her to the grossest unkindness—the belief that she can re-create Harriet on and off the canvas. Emma's desire for social control also causes her snobbery to the Martins and her rudeness to Miss Bates. Her snobbery to the Martins is morally reprehensible to the modern reader, but it was also reprehensible to nineteenth-century readers. Trilling writes that the "yeoman class had always held a strong position in English class feeling, and at this time especially, only stupid or ignorant people felt privileged to look down upon them." And Emma's treatment of Miss Bates at the picnic is made to seem doubly heartless by Miss Bates's quiet acquiescence.

And yet, though Emma sometimes acts in an unconscionable manner, the reader is well aware that she is not without a conscience. It pricks her throughout. For instance, after Harriet meets Robert Martin at Ford's, Emma realizes that she "was not thoroughly comfortable" with her own actions. At the end, though, Emma has changed enough to think that it "would be a great pleasure to know Robert Martin" and happily attends the wedding. She apologizes to Miss Bates and befriends Jane Fairfax. She learns to

treat others with tenderness and to respect their personal privacy and autonomy. She learns to reject both the roles of a “do-nothing” and a “do-all.” At the end she considers a future match between Mrs. Weston’s daughter and one of Isabella’s sons, but her matchmaking is no longer dangerous because she now realizes the problems caused by the abuse of power. She has learned a lesson: a lady is not a bully. But Emma learns an equally important lesson: a lady is not a weakling. Unlike so many nineteenth-century heroines, she does not confuse kindness to others with fear of others and subjection of self. At the end of the novel, she is still able to say to Knightley, “I always deserve the best treatment, because I never put up with any other.”

Emma’s awareness of her own “unpardonable arrogance” allows readers to continue their empathetic construction of her character. Emma has learned to balance power and propriety, reflecting Austen’s ideal of a lady as a woman who is strong but not manipulative. Knightley’s proposal follows soon after, and at this point in the narrative Austen inserts those well-known lines:

What did she say?—Just what she ought, of course.—A lady always does.—She said enough to show there need not be despair—and to invite him to say more himself.

In this passage, the narrator mocks readers’ expectations for a love scene (Booth, *Company* 433–34). Such mockery is possible, though, because at this point Austen’s portrait of Emma has educated the reader about the attributes of an ideal “lady.” Austen creates what Wolfgang Iser calls “a gap in the text,” so the “reader’s imagination is left free to paint in the scene.” This freedom is a test of the reader’s learning process. From the text’s comparisons and contrasts of Emma with Harriet, Jane, Isabella, and Augusta Elton, we are to have learned what are the best attributes that make up the most admirable type of “lady.”

After Knightley’s proposal, many modern readers such as Gilbert and Gubar have trouble in their construction of Emma’s character. It is as if they continue to see Emma solely through her own self-critical thoughts instead of trying to construct her through the text as a whole. Booth counteracts this reading by stating that readers often “succumb morally to what was simply required formally”—a plot that ends in marriage. And Poovey argues that although Austen’s

novels end in marriage, these marriages show the heroine’s “achievement of maturity, not the victory of a man.” In *Emma*, Austen adds a simple yet crucial twist to the conventional marriage plot: Knightley abdicates his seat in the county, his own place of authority, to live in Emma’s home—her own seat of authority. The knight does not carry off the princess. The gentleman does not place the lady within the shrine of his own home.

At this point in the novel, readers should have learned to step back and try to construct characters and reality through a multiplicity of perspectives. Just because Emma sees Knightley as a superior being while she is in the first flush of her self-reproach and awakened desire does not mean that the reader is also supposed to see Knightley as a superior being. Such readings overlook the important fact that Knightley, like Emma, has publicly embarrassed himself through a misreading of the true relationship between Jane and Frank. Knightley pays a great deal of attention to Jane and extols her virtues throughout the novel. After Knightley orders his carriage to take Jane to the Coles’ dinner party, Knightley’s attention to Jane is put in a new light when Mrs. Weston tells Emma she believes Knightley may marry Jane. Later Knightley, in an uncharacteristic loud and public voice, inquires “particularly” about Jane in a conversation with Miss Bates through a window. No wonder Emma begins to wonder if Knightley is in love with Jane. Of course, even at this point in the novel, the reader is quite aware that Emma is not always a reliable interpreter of reality, but this time Emma’s views are corroborated by others and evidence in the text. When she warns Knightley that he “may hardly be aware . . . how highly” he values Jane, the forthright Knightley becomes suddenly engrossed upon buttoning his gaiters. Emma’s view is also given credence when Knightley admits that Mr. Cole suggested that his attention to Jane had prompted speculation about the nature of their relationship.

So while the secret of Jane and Frank’s engagement plays a joke upon Emma, it also—for a while—becomes a joke upon Knightley. And in an age when “making love” to a woman meant simply calling upon her and praising her publicly, it is hardly surprising that Knightley’s attention to Jane has caused rumors. These type of rumors, as nineteenth-century readers clearly understood, could be

especially socially damaging to a single woman like Jane, who is also beautiful and impoverished. Knightley clearly understands Jane's precarious social position and even criticizes Frank for sending her the piano, yet he does not seem aware that his praise of Jane could also cause her social embarrassment. And although Knightley denounces matchmaking, he does play matchmaker by trying to ascertain whether Harriet is a suitable mate for Robert Martin. Knightley's own matchmaking attempts backfire, much like Emma's, because his personal attentions to Harriet make her believe he loves her. In short, Knightley is not, as he has traditionally been portrayed by critics, a paragon of personal judgment. He, like Emma, is deceived by the differences between his own perceptions and reality. In constructing Knightley's character, critics also overlook the fact that he apologizes to Emma for his previous paternal role. He tells Emma, "It was very natural for you to say, what right has he to lecture me? . . . I do not believe I did you any good." Their mutual worship is simply Austen's depiction of the first flush of romantic love, not a sign that Knightley is infallible.

Knightley is the only one to criticize Emma (besides Emma herself) in all of *Highbury* because he is the only one who is her intellectual equal. Their marriage offers her insurance against the "intellectual solitude" that endangers her at the novel's beginning. But as much as Emma loves Knightley, she will not leave her father, a point that Knightley understands and respects. After they agree to live together at Hartfield, Emma thinks of Knightley as a "companion" and a "partner." This equality is reinforced by Mrs. Weston's reflections, who happily considers the marriage as "all equal" without "sacrifice on any side." Emma's love of her father and her desire to live at Hartfield should not be interpreted as an example of female submission to patriarchy. Mr. Woodhouse has never had any control over Emma; Hartfield has been the site of her independence. The first Mrs. Weston was unhappy because she could not at the same time be "the wife of Captain Weston and Miss Churchill of Enscombe." Yet Emma solves the dilemma of the loss of female identity that was inherent in most nineteenth-century marriages. She will continue to be Miss Woodhouse of Hartfield, to be mistress at her own home [as she] take[s] on the role of Mrs. Knightley.

In the face of Emma's faults, some critics have deemed Jane as the "good" character in the novel. Booth believes that "Jane is superior to Emma in almost every part of the book" (Rhetoric 249). Though the "narrator is non-committal toward Jane Fairfax," Booth writes, "the author can be inferred as approving of her almost completely" ("Distance" 182). Harold Bloom, who criticizes Booth for giving Jane center stage, still believes that the "splendid Jane Fairfax is easier to admire" than Emma. Adena Rosmarin echoes these ideas when she says that Jane is "too good and too distant to be a good character." While Jane is certainly too distant to be a good character, it seems doubtful that she is actually "too good." Her love for Frank, who lacks personal strength and continually treats her with foolish inconsideration, calls into question her own character. And most notably, she shares the same fault as two of the other female characters: passivity. Like Isabella and Harriet, Jane's passivity allows others to control her. She submits to Frank's thoughtless treatment of her until his public flirtations with Emma force her to capitulate into the "slave-trade" of the governess market. While Jane, like Isabella and Harriet, is undeniably a "lady," she cannot embody Austen's highest ideals of "ladyhood" because she is too passive, too demure, and too much like the "proper lady" of the conduct books.

While reading *Emma* as a lesson on ladyhood might seem at first a superficial approach to the novel, in the end, such a reading increases the complexity of the portrait that Austen has painted of Emma. This reading also depicts Emma in a more favorable light than many traditional analyses. Through the novel's portrayal of Emma, readers learn what Austen considered to be the ideal attributes of a "lady"—and some of those attributes may surprise modern readers. A lady, like Emma, is not "personally vain" and has no "taste for finery." She speaks her own mind. She is strong. She is intelligent. She is artistic. She learns from her own mistakes. She cares about and for her family. She is willing to marry—but marriage must meet her own terms. This is a definition of a "lady" that most modern readers—even feminists—could live with. This is even a definition that some feminists would see as a definition of a feminist.

Like Austen, who was afraid that Emma was a "heroine whom no one but myself will much like", reading *Emma* as a lesson in "ladyhood" is a



ABOVE ALL ELSE, IT CAN DIFFERENTIATE OUR AWARENESS OF HOW THE NOVEL CAN CONVEY AND EXPLORE THE LIFE OF THE MIND, FOR THE BILDUNGSROMAN IS NOT SIMPLY AN ALLEGORICAL SCENARIO OF PHILOSOPHICAL POSITIONS AND VALUES.”

critical approach that most modern readers will not like. But such a reading also helps to explain the continuing popularity of Austen inside and outside academia. The dialectic between female power and female propriety continues to act as a divisive force in twentieth-century America just as it was in nineteenth-century England. One of the great strengths of *Emma*, for both nineteenth- and twentieth-century readers, is Austen’s portrait of a lady who learns to compromise between power and propriety to live within her community without compromising herself.

Source: Denise Kohn, “Reading *Emma* as a Lesson on ‘Ladyhood’: A Study in the Domestic Bildungsroman,” in *Essays in Literature*, Vol. 22, Spring 1995, pp. 45–58.

Martin Swales

In the following essay, Swales explores German Bildungsroman to identify inherent problems in “character and selfhood” in the novel.

At one point in Gilbert and Sullivan’s *The Mikado* the ruler of Japan shares with the audience his vision of a judicial system in which there would be perfect consonance between punishment and crime. The crimes which he chooses as test cases seem mercifully lightweight—which contrasts engagingly with the ghoulishness of the proposed remedies. One criminal who provokes the Mikado’s ire is the bore, and it is decreed that he be condemned to listen to

A series of sermons
By mystical Germans
Who preach from ten till four.

As far as I am aware, W. S. Gilbert is not here pillorying any particular tradition within German theology; rather, he exploits the happy coincidence that Germans rhymes with sermons to draw upon English skepticism about German culture generally and to suggest that the German

cast of mind is characterized by prodigious learnedness and long-windedness, by an unrelieved spiritual profundity that transforms anything and everything into a mystical disquisition.

W. S. Gilbert is not alone in his reservations about the German mind. George Henry Lewes, in his pioneering work *Life and Works of Goethe* (1855), at one point defines the German cast of mind by asking his readers to imagine that a Frenchman, an Englishman, and a German have been commissioned to write a treatise about the camel. The Frenchman, after a brief contemplation of the animal in question, writes a feuilleton in blameless French which, however, adds nothing to the general knowledge of the camel. The Englishman spends two years observing camels and produces a bulky volume full of facts and scrupulous observation—but devoid of any overall idea or conceptual framework to hold the dossier together. And the German, despising French frivolity and English empiricism, retires to his study, there “to construct the Idea of a Camel from out of the depths of his Moral Consciousness. And he is still at it.”

Now of course Lewes—himself the most persuasive advocate of German culture generally and of Goethe in particular—had no intention of damning the German tradition lock, stock, and barrel. But it is interesting that he raises the notion of the appalling learnedness of the German mind in the prefatory paragraphs of his discussion of Goethe’s novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*. In introducing this work, he speaks of the German’s fondness for plunging “into the depths.” “Of all the horrors known to the German of this school,” Lewes continues, “there is no horror like that of the surface—it is more terrible to him than cold water.”

I think I had better come clean at the outset and admit that it is my purpose to examine (among other texts) that novel of Goethe’s that elicited from Lewes the prefatory apology of the camel parable. Moreover, I shall be looking not at one novel but at several, for I wish to examine that German novel genre—the Bildungsroman—which would seem, alas, to be the perfect corroboration of the Mikado’s notion of the German-tradition-as-punishment. The Bildungsroman, the novel of personal growth and development, has traditionally been seen as the German counterpart to the realistic novel of England, France, and Russia. My enterprise—as is appropriate for a German topic—immediately

raises a number of theoretical problems. First—and most obvious—one asks why one needs to bother with literary genres at all. Clearly there is no reason why the critic should not establish any conceivable genre for the purposes of comparison and contrast. We could envisage the novel of adultery, of bankruptcy, of aviation, and so on. Such a model of a genre would, I suspect, have no legitimate pretensions to historical status; it would simply be a heuristic tool, a grid that allows the critic to select a number of texts for analytical and comparative purposes. But this notion of the theoretical—or, as I would prefer to call it, taxonomic—genre should not prevent us from realizing that there is also such a thing as the historical genre.

Tzvetan Todorov outlines the vital issues when he points out that the concept of genre or species is one taken from the natural sciences but that “there is a qualitative difference as to the meanings of the term ‘genre’ or ‘specimen’ depending on whether they are applied to natural things or the works of the mind.” He continues, “in the former case, the appearance of a new example does not necessarily modify the characteristics of the species . . . the birth of a new tiger does not modify the species in its definition,” whereas in art “every work modifies the sum of possible works, each new example alters the species.”

It is important to recognize that the literary species or genre is, then, a historically evolving thing and that the mechanism of that evolution is the interlocking of—in T. S. Eliot’s terms—tradition and the individual talent. In other words, not all genre constructs are simply foisted on the individual works after the event by eager scholars in quest of a taxonomy. Rather, the historical agency of the genre constitutes, in Hans Robert Jauss’s term, that “horizon of expectation” with reference to which each individual work is made and in the context of which each individual work is received by its contemporary—and subsequent—audience. The work activates these expectations in order to debate with them, to refashion, to challenge, perhaps even to parody them. Herein resides the clement of newness, the individuality which is at one and the same time the modification *and* the transmission of the literary genre.

What, then, is a Bildungsroman? The word was coined in the second decade of the nineteenth century, but some fifty years elapsed before Wilhelm Dilthey’s famous discussion of

the genre which, as it were, put the term on the map with a vengeance. The capricious history of the term itself should not, however, blind us to the fact that the genre to which it refers existed as a particularly respected—and respectable—form of novel writing throughout the German nineteenth century. If there is an identifiable *terminus a quo*, it is in my view to be found around 1770 with the publication of the first edition of Wieland’s *Agathon* in 1767 and of Friedrich von Blanckenburg’s *Versuch über den Roman* (Essay on the Novel) in 1774. Blanckenburg’s theoretical work grew out of his enthusiasm for Wieland’s novel; for him (as also, incidentally, for Lessing) *Agathon* marked the coming of age of the novel form. Wieland’s narrative, in Blanckenburg’s eyes, transformed the traditional novel genre by investing it with a new psychological and intellectual seriousness. *Agathon* over and over again engages the reader in debate about novel fictions; in the process it repudiates the romance, which so long-windedly fuses love story and adventure novel, and it repudiates the moral constancy, the interpretative transparency, of traditional novel characters. For Blanckenburg, Wieland’s signal achievement resided in his ability to get inside a character, to portray the complex stuff of human potential which, in interaction with the outside world, yields the palpable process of human *Werden*, of growth and change. By this means artistic—and human—dignity and cohesion was conferred on the sequence of episodic adventures which novel heroes, by tradition, underwent.

The Bildungsroman was born, then, in specific historical circumstances, in a demonstrable interlocking of theory and praxis. It is a novel form recognizably animated by the *Humanitätsideal* of late eighteenth-century Germany in that it is concerned with the whole person unfolding in all his complexity and elusiveness. It is a concern shared by Humboldt, Goethe, Schiller, and many others, and the discursive or theoretical formulations of the idea (and ideal) of *Bildung* are legion. But it is important to remember that what concerns us here is a genre of the novel, not a theoretical or cultural tract. And the novel makes certain demands in respect of plot and characterization that prevent the concern for *Bildung* from being articulated at a purely conceptual level. Indeed, this is part of the problem. The serious novel may be born with the advent of the Bildungsroman, but there remains

a certain bad conscience, as it were. For the novel, it seems, retains that questionable legacy of having to do with events, adventures, episodes—all of which militate against human and poetic substance. The need constantly to rehabilitate the novel form is expressed with almost monotonous unanimity by German novel theorists throughout the nineteenth century, and it is nearly always couched in the same terms as a concern for *poetry* within the traditional *prose* of the novel. The danger with the novel is, apparently, that it all too readily backslides into an irredeemably prosaic condition. The paradigmatic statement is to be found in Hegel's *Aesthetics*.

This novelistic quality is born when the knightly existence is again taken seriously, is filled out with real substance. The contingency of outward, actual existence has been transformed into the firm, secure order of bourgeois society and the state. . . . Thereby the chivalrous character of these heroes whose deeds fill recent novels is transformed. They stand as individuals with their subjective goals of love, honor, ambition or with their ideals of improving the world, over against the existing order and prose of reality, which from all sides places obstacles in their path. . . . These struggles are, however, in the modern world nothing but the apprenticeship, the education of the individual at the hands of the given reality. . . . For the conclusion of such an apprenticeship usually amounts to the hero getting the rough spots knocked off him. . . . In the last analysis he usually gets his girl and some kind of job, marries, and becomes a philistine just like all the others.

This is a crucial passage. And it is crucial in its all-pervasive ambivalence. On the one hand, Hegel affirms the seriousness of this kind of fiction, it being synonymous with the novel's ability to anchor the time-honored epic pattern in modern bourgeois reality. In this sense Hegel seems to offer his approval of the process by which a somewhat fastidious, idealistic—in a word, “poetic”—young man is licked into shape by the “prose” of bourgeois society. On the other hand, Hegel also seems to be saying that there is something debased—and debasing—about this process. That the highest wisdom of the novel and of its latter-day knightly adventurer should reside in the acquisition of wife, family, and job security seems a sorry—indeed philistine—reduction of the grand model. What is particularly suggestive for our purposes is the extent to which Hegel perceives the novel as hedging its bets in respect of prosaic, bourgeois

reality. His comments tell us much about the Bildungsroman in that it is precisely this novel form that is animated by the dialectic of poetry and prose. And the uncertainty is nowhere more urgent, as Hegel himself saw, than with regard to the vexed question of the novel's ending. When Hegel formulates the essential theme of the novel as the conflict “between the poetry of the heart and the resisting prose of circumstances,” he sets the seal on virtually all German thinking about the novel for the rest of the century. And his specter, or, to be more respectful, his *Geist*, can still be clearly felt in Lukács's *Die Theorie des Romans* of 1912.

I have already stressed that the Bildungsroman is a novel form that is concerned with the complex and diffused *Werden*, or growth, of the hero. How, then, is this process intimated narratively; how does it embody the dialectic of “poetry” and “prose”? In its portrayal of the hero's psychology the Bildungsroman operates with a tension between a concern for the sheer complexity of individual potentiality on the one hand and, on the other, a recognition that practical reality—marriage, family, a career—is a necessary dimension of the hero's self-realization, albeit one that by definition implies a limitation, indeed constriction, of the self. The tension is that between the *Nebeneinander* (the “one-alongside-another”) of possible selves within the hero and the *Nacheinander* (the “one-after-another”) of linear time, of practical activity, of story, or personal history. In one sense, then, the Bildungsroman undeniably has something of the rarefied epic of inwardness (the “mystical sermon”) that has alienated its English readers in particular. It can tend to dissolve the lived chronology of a life into some providential scenario of symbolic patterns and recurrences. It can at times come perilously close to espousing what J. P. Stern has called “a chimerical freedom—as though somehow it were possible *not* to enter the river of experience that flows all one way.” It can be less than strenuous in its recognition of the chain of cause and effect within practical living and of the integrity and moral otherness of those characters with whom the protagonist comes into contact. On occasion we can feel that these characters exist, so to speak, not in their own right but for the educative benefit of the hero: that they are significant insofar as they are underwritten by a potentiality slumbering within him. This is as much as to say that these characters are part of a providential

decor whose *raison d'être* is to be found in their relatedness (in a sense that can vary from the literal to the metaphorical) to the hero. But all this is only part of the truth about the Bildungsroman. For what the major novels of the tradition show is not achieved goals, not comfortable solutions, but at best directions, implications, intimations of the possible, which are shown to be no more than that. Moreover, they do not reach the point of dissolving all relationship to plot, to the *Nacheinander* of story. They may seem to promise just such an obliteration of the flow of resistantly linear experience. But they cannot deliver the goods; they do not break faith with the "prose" of the novel form and write an epistemological or aesthetic treatise. In E. M. Forster's words, "Yes, oh dear yes, the novel tells a story," and the story is made up not simply of beneficent experiences that welcome the "poetry" of the individual's inwardness; hence the tension I have spoken of, a tension which is sustained and narratively enacted—and not resolved. The grasping for clarity and losing it, the alternation of certainty of purpose with a sense of being swept along by the sheer randomness of living—these are seen to be the very stuff of human experience and to be such meaning and distinction as men are able to attain, as the Bildungsroman is able to affirm. The novel, then, is written for the sake of the journey—and not for the sake of the happy ending which that journey seems to promise.

This, then, is a sketch in necessarily broad strokes of the implications inherent in the Bildungsroman as a historical genre. I want now to comment briefly on six major texts from within that tradition. Specialist readers will, I hope, forgive me if these are but somewhat impressionistic interpretative sketches. I have tried elsewhere to provide the detailed argument both on the theory and on the praxis of the genre. I am here concerned with the implications the genre has for an understanding of the European novel as a whole; therefore, the individual text receives less than its due.

Wieland's *Agathon* (1767) operates with a profusion of narrative commentary, which on occasion reaches the proportions of a barrage. Over and over again the narrator reminds us that Agathon is not the usual novel hero; the typical protagonist should be both morally and epistemologically a constant, a known quantity throughout, whereas Agathon changes so

frequently that the reader must ask if he will ever know and reliably understand him.

He seemed by turns [nach und nach] a pious idealist, a Platonist, a republican, a hero, a stoic, a voluptuary; and he was none of these things, although he at various times passed through all these phases and always a little of each robbed off on him. It will probably continue like this for quite some time.

To look back on Agathon's life is to perceive a *Nacheinander*, a chronological sequence. Because the specific circumstances of Agathon's life change, Agathon himself changes. Yet he is always *potentially* the sum total of all these "phases," of all these possible selves—and of many others. In other words, Agathon's true self can only be conceived of as a *Nebeneinander*, as a clustering of manifold possibilities, of which at any given time he can only realize (in both senses of the word) a small proportion. Hence the narrator's irony: in one sense, the significance of the *Nacheinander*, of the plot sequence is relentlessly called into question, but in another sense the hero *does* have a story which is somehow his and nobody else's. And stories need endings. Wieland here has recourse to the fiction of there being an original Greek manuscript on which his account is based. This manuscript ends with a typically novelistic (which is to say, improbable) happy ending, which Wieland both appropriates and undermines. His irony allows him to have his cake and eat it too: to tell a novel and to mount a critique of the expectations inherent in novel convention. Hence the happy ending, that epistemologically simple foreclosure of the process of human growth and self-discovery, is consistently undermined by the narrator's irony.

Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1796) operates with a comparable irony. Wilhelm leaves his bourgeois home and seeks experiences that promise an adequate extension of his personality. He is for some time attracted to the theater, a realm which clearly allows him to widen both actively and imaginatively his experience. But gradually he grows out of this phase of his life and finds himself more and more drawn to the Society of the Tower. The Society of the Tower is made up chiefly of aristocrats, and it is a world devoted to human—and humane—wholeness. In many ways the Society of the Tower would appear to be the goal of Wilhelm's quest, for it seems to reconcile individual limitation and human totality, practical

activity and inherent potential, or—in Hegel’s terms—the prose of the practical world and the poetry of the individual heart and imagination. In an appropriately dignified ceremony Wilhelm is admitted to the Society of the Tower; he receives a parchment scroll full of wise sayings, he learns that the boy Felix is indeed his son. Finally the words of graduation are pronounced over him: “Hail to thee, young man. Thy apprenticeship is done.” We know that all the members of the Society of the Tower have contributed the history of their apprenticeships, their *Lehrjahre*, to its archive. The title of the novel refers to the hero’s apprenticeship, and his very name—Meister—promises the attainment to mastery. We should, then, by rights have reached the end of the novel. Indeed, our expectations seem to be speedily confirmed, for our hero approaches life with a new mastery and certainty of purpose. He decides that Therese is the appropriate wife for himself and mother for Felix, and he proposes to her. But this action, alas, turns out to be a complete error, from whose consequences he is shielded by pure good fortune. It comes, therefore, as no surprise that our hero feels cheated; so do we, and so, one suspects, did Goethe’s contemporary readers, on whose taste for novels of secret societies *Wilhelm Meister* clearly draws, without, as it were, delivering the goods. Goethe, it seems to me, is, like Wieland before him, mounting a critique of traditional novel expectations precisely in order to set up a narrative irony that both validates and calls into question the epistemological assumptions behind such expectations. We note that there is something strangely discursive and wordy about the Society of the Tower (it displays, for example, a somewhat schoolmasterly fondness for wise sayings and maxims). The Society may be dedicated to the concept of human wholeness, but it is not the embodiment of that wholeness. Nor does it confer inalienable possession of wisdom on the aspiring (but struggling) protagonist. The law of linear experience, the *Nacheinander* of plot, continues out beyond the promised goal. So how does the novel end? Like *Agathon* before it, it closes with a happy ending which is undercut by irony as fairy-tale ease and stage-managed providentiality take over.

At one point toward the end of Adalbert Stifter’s *Der Nachsommer* (1857, translated as *Indian Summer*) the hero—we wait a long time before we discover that his name is Heinrich Drendorf—undertakes a world journey.

I went first via Switzerland to Italy; to Venice, Florence, Rome, Naples, Syracuse, Palermo, Malta. From Malta I took a ship to Spain, which I crossed from south to north with many detours. I was in Gibraltar, Granada, Seville, Cordoba, Toledo, Madrid, and many other lesser towns. . . . I had been absent for one and a half months less than two years. It was again spring when I returned.

For the first time in this lengthy novel, experiences are recounted which would commonly be regarded as interesting and exciting. Yet these details are reduced to a mere list, to an empty, cataloging baldness which is never applied to the things and modest activities of the Rose House, the dwelling of Risach, the mentor figure. The description of the world tour exudes an unmistakable inertia. Heinrich tells us, “I had been absent [ich war abwesend gewesen] for one and a half months less than two years,” and this explains the deadness of the list. The places visited represent an exile from the centrality of the Rose House, an interlude of inauthenticity, of “being away from being.” It is therefore understandable that, after what amounts to a package tour *avant la lettre*, Heinrich returns home with relief. But then he always returns with relief to the Rose House, for it is within that world that everyday objects and modest, recurring human activities can be celebrated with a human (and narrative) affirmation that serves to highlight the emptiness of the world tour. Stifter’s art is pitted, therefore, against common expectations of human and narrative interest. It is this which makes *Der Nachsommer* the painstaking yet incandescent litany that it is.

Der Nachsommer is a novel written against history in a dual sense: against social and political history, in that no narrative interest is displayed in the changes and frictions within mid-nineteenth-century Austrian society; against personal history, against story and plot, in that Heinrich’s experiences ultimately all dissolve into a sublime stasis—hence the relative unimportance attached to the naming of the hero. In Hegel’s terms, Stifter’s novel does reconcile the poetry of inward values and the prose of outward, practical activity. It is also the one novel in the Bildungsroman tradition that resolves the tension between *Nebeneinander* and *Nacheinander*. But it can do so only by confining the story to a number of simple, practical activities underwritten by an urgent—almost hectoring—sense of human and artistic wholeness. The tone is one of sacramental pedantry; the difficulty attending upon the

attempt to write an unproblematic Bildungsroman in fact serves to intimate the increasing tension to which the genre is prone, a tension which can be exorcised only by converting the novel into a monolithic litany.

Gottfried Keller's *Der grüne Heinrich* (1880, translated as *Green Henry*) is concerned, like so many of the major Bildungsromans with an artist, or more accurately, with someone of artistic potential. Heinrich Lee tries throughout his early years to replace reality with the alternative world of his imaginative and fictive capacities. In the course of the novel, we see how he succumbs increasingly to that dualism which is so much of his own making. What Heinrich is unable to perceive is that reality—even the modest reality of a Swiss peasant community—is sustained not just by pragmatic allegiances and practical accommodations but also by an inward, imaginative assent which rounds out the modest facts and experiences into an all-embracing human totality. Because he cuts himself off from such human fulfillment, Heinrich condemns himself to an increasingly lifeless existence. His art suffers too, in that it is either a dissociated fantasy with no enlivening relationship to the objective world or a painstaking copy of physical details with no overall imaginative conception to sustain it. Heinrich returns to Switzerland at the end of the novel, becoming a “somewhat melancholy and monosyllabic civil servant.”

Keller's novel is grounded in the disjunction within the protagonist's experience of the prose of concrete circumstances on the one hand, and of the poetry of the heart's potential on the other. The narrative perspective is all-important here; the second version of the novel is sustained in the first person throughout. The recollecting voice of Heinrich the narrator is able to document precisely the disjunction I have referred to above—and to suggest the alternative (but unrealized) possibility that there need be no such absolute gulf between poetry and prose, between the complex inwardness, the *Nebeneinander* of the inner man and the *Nacheinander* of his actual living in the realm of human society. The tension that is so characteristic of the Bildungsroman becomes here a dualism; moreover, Keller's novel suggests with an urgency rare in the genre the dangers of such unfocused idealism. There is, in this sense, a moral astringency to Keller's debate with the Bildungsroman tradition which so informs his own creation.

Finally, a few brief comments about two twentieth-century Bildungsromans. Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg* (1924, *The Magic Mountain*, 1927) chronicles the experiences undergone by a young man in the course of a seven-year stay in a sanatorium. These years, it is suggested, constitute a journey into self-knowledge, a *Bildungsreise*, whose goal, it would seem, is to be found in the chapter entitled “Snow,” in which Hans Castorp has a dream vision of the wholeness of man, of a totality which is not only greater than all antinomies but which is also humane, affirmative in its relationship to the living process. No reader can fail to sense the crucial importance of these insights. And yet the goal of Castorp's quest, once glimpsed, once formulated, is forgotten as he stumbles back through the snow to the sanatorium. The vision, the complete perception of human totality, exists outside ordinary time; it can be glimpsed as in a dream; it can be formulated discursively, but it cannot be possessed as an abiding and effective recipe for everyday living. The *Nebeneinander* cannot halt the *Nacheinander* of Castorp's experience; his personal history continues on its wayward path until he is caught up in the events of that other *Nacheinander* to which he has paid such scant attention—world history. For at the end of the novel, the “problem child of life” (*Sorgenkind des Lebens*) finds himself plunged into the holocaust of the First World War.

The rhythm of Mann's novel in many ways recalls that of *Wilhelm Meister*; the seeming Grails of both novels—the Society of the Tower, the snow vision, both of which entail a perception of man as a humane totality—do not come at the end of the novels in which they occur. In both cases the hero emerges on the other side of the goal, feeling not really any the wiser. Both expressions of human totality have in common a certain discursiveness, a limitation to the conceptual postulation of totality, which is relativized by the demands of the hero's ongoing experience. What, then, do we make of Hans Castorp, our mediocre—*mittelmäßig*—protagonist? He is, I would suggest, mediocre in the precise sense of *Mittelmäßig*, “middle way.” He is undistinguished by any dominant characteristic or capacity; he is the point at which the other characters in the novel, all of them so much better-known quantities than Hans Castorp, intersect. He is, as it were, over-endowed with potentiality. And yet the novel does not allow him to become simply a static cipher for the complexity of man, for he is also

a Person, an ordinary individual who, like all of us, has to live his (and nobody else's) life.

Thomas Mann's employment of the Bildungsroman tradition in this novel is the measure of his urgent need, under the impact of the 1914–18 war, to review his own and his country's intellectual tradition. A similar critical urgency is, in my view, the source of Hermann Hesse's partly skeptical, partly affectionate employment of the genre in his last novel, *Das Glasperlenspiel* (1943, *The Glass Bead Game*)—where the pressure of historical events comes from the turmoil of the 1930s. The novel is narrated by an inhabitant of Castalia, an ivory-tower region dominated by intellect and meditation, who in the first few pages of his account makes derogatory remarks about the bourgeois fondness for biography. Such an interest in the individual and his life story is, he argues, symptomatic of a declining culture. Castalia, on the other hand, is sustained by the principle of suprapersonal service; it has its center of gravity in that model of synchronic universality, the Glass Bead Game, which, in its very abstraction from the specific, the individuated, the particular, creates a scenario for the total play of all human values and experiences. However, the experiences with which the narrator is crucially concerned are those of one man—Josef Knecht (the name, meaning, roughly, servant, is, of course, a contrastive echo of Goethe's Meister). Knecht joins the Castalian province and becomes its supreme exponent and servant as Master of the Glass Bead Game. But he then leaves Castalia, because he can no longer accept the abstraction and bloodlessness of the province's values. In its striving for spiritual totality, Castalia is hostile to the ontological dimension that is history. But Knecht, through his encounters with Pater Jacobus, comes to perceive the truth of history—to perceive that Castalia itself is, like everything else, a historical phenomenon. At the same time he realizes that he too is a historical phenomenon in the sense that he has a personal history, that he lives, not in timeless abstraction, but in the chronological specificity of choice, of cause and effect. In other words, he learns that he has a story, that his experiences are inalienably enshrined in the *Nacheinander* of a lived life. All this is faithfully reported by the narrator—without his ever modifying that Castalian ideology with which he begins his account and which Knecht's life so manifestly calls into question. It is here that we find in my view the narrative and

thematic center of Hesse's text; and the conflict between the *Nebeneinander* (the Castalian striving for universality and totality) and the *Nacheinander* (of Knecht's story) is the measure of the novel's engagement with the Bildungsroman tradition.

The foregoing has been a somewhat rapid review of the theory and practice of the German Bildungsroman from about 1770 to 1943. I want in conclusion to inquire into the implications of this novel tradition for the European novel in general. Let me begin by clarifying one or two issues. In quantitative terms the Bildungsroman is by no means the only kind of novel to come out of Germany in the period with which I am concerned. Nevertheless, it must be said that most German novel writing of distinction does in some form or another partake of this genre. I know it is nowadays fashionable within the curiously neopositivistic enthusiasm for *Rezeptionsgeschichte* (the history of the reception of a work) to say that scholarly inquiry should be concerned not with literary quality but with the demonstrable history of reading habits within a given society. But it seems to me difficult to avoid the issue of literary quality—for the simple reason that no amount of *Rezeptionsgeschichte* will alter the feebleness of a novel such as Freytag's *Soll und Haben* (1855) when compared with, say, *Dombey and Son*. Moreover, as a number of critics have shown recently, the 1830s and 1840s in Germany witnessed a consistent—but ultimately unavailing—attempt to direct the novel away from the Bildungsroman, away from the dominant presence of *Wilhelm Meister* and toward a more socially and historically aware novel (after the manner of Walter Scott). The preeminence of the Bildungsroman can be gauged from the fact that it was not confined simply to serious novels for the adult market. In 1880 there appeared a novel in the German language which must be accounted one of the supreme best-sellers of all time. It has been translated into dozens of foreign languages, it has been filmed and produced in television serializations, and its readership apparently numbers some forty million. If you are still wondering what I am talking about, let me give you the title. It is, of course, *Heidi* by Johanna Spyri. But this, let me hasten to add, is not the correct title of that amazingly successful book; for the first volume of Heidi's adventures is actually entitled *Heidis Lehr- und Wanderjahre*. All of which, I suppose, goes to show that not every

novel in German which partakes of the Bildungsroman tradition has to be a sermon by a mystical German who preaches from ten till four.

Let me add a further word in justification of this novel tradition. W. H. Bruford, in a study of the term *Bildung*, has suggested many of the ways in which it speaks of the characteristic limitation of the German middle classes in the nineteenth century; the inwardness of the values esteemed, the fastidious aversion to practical affairs, to politics, the sacramental pursuit of self-cultivation; all these factors bespeak that well-known phenomenon, the *deutsche Misere*, which has been identified as the lack of bourgeois emancipation in nineteenth-century Germany. The specific social and economic circumstances that obtained and their impact on German cultural and intellectual life have been acutely analyzed by a number of distinguished commentators. Moreover, one should add that the nineteenth-century situation is part of a larger legacy which is bound up with the particularism of the Holy Roman Empire, with its tangle of small principalities. The lack of a unified national arena, of a focus, a metropolis where the spiritual issues of the age could find palpable enactment helped to produce a situation in which the nation existed as an inward—or, if not inward, then at least cultural and linguistic—unit, rather than as a demographic entity. One can register all this as a shortcoming, as something that in linguistic terms militated against there being an energetic language of public (and journalistic) debate. But the lack produced as its corollary a certain gain, a language that could explore inward and elusive experience with an assuredness and differentiation rare in other European languages. Such a language, usually associated with religious or mystical experience, became a potent contribution to the autobiographical and biographical narrative form with the advent of the complex phenomenon of secularization in the second half of the eighteenth century. The pietist, confessional mode is that inward quest for the soul's vindication which so often entails an awareness of sinfulness as a precondition of spiritual distinction. Such concerns (at once thematic and linguistic), in their secularized form, clearly gave the Bildungsroman part of its characteristic impetus. Now all this may be, to English observers, an inauspicious climate for the emergence of the modern novel in Germany. The dangerous historical

consequences of the German reverence for inwardness are indicated in Bruford's book and have been underpinned in a recent article by R. Hinton Thomas, in which it is shown that the notion of *Bildung*—with its central concept of the organic personality—could be, and was, transferred into the sphere of social and political debate in Germany, and became part of the stock vocabulary of German conservatism on which Nazism was later to draw. These are pertinent insights. But neither Bruford nor Thomas are concerned in any thoroughgoing way with the Bildungsroman, which is after all, a vital part of the tradition they explore. And I want to insist that the Bildungsroman is precisely a voice from within the German intellectual tradition which can command our assent and respect—because it does not offer unequivocal certainties, unreflected values, but embodies the difficulties of those aspirations which, in their theoretical and discursive formulation, can prove so forbidding for English readers. In other words, if we want to look for a critique of *Bildung*, the Bildungsroman is an obvious and eloquent starting point. Moreover, it seems to me that many of the features of the Bildungsroman that allowed it in the past to be relegated to the periphery of the European novel tradition—with the familiar sigh of relief that it was yet another example of the pathology of the German mind—are now part of our experience of the twentieth-century novel. I have in mind the self-consciousness of the Bildungsroman, its discursiveness and self-reflectivity, its narrative obliqueness, its concern for the elusiveness of selfhood, its dialectical critique of the role of plot in the novel—all these things are not merely German (that is, provincial) excesses; they are the staple diet of the modern novelist's unease in respect of the form he has inherited. All of this makes it very tempting to engage in some polemical historicism—and to suggest that the Bildungsroman, precisely because it articulates the unease of a society not easily at home in the bourgeois age, speaks particularly forcefully to our age, when that unease is so very apparent.

We are, I suspect, all familiar with the argument that the novel expresses the contradictions of bourgeois society, that it has its roots in, to quote Raymond Williams's phrase, the "creative disturbance" generated by the norms of that society. Or to put the matter another way, the modern novel (and we must remember that, in terms of simple chronology, the Bildungsroman tradition in Germany coincides with the rise of

the novel as a European phenomenon) is born under the astrological sign of irony. Ernst Behler has shown that irony as we know it came into being as the expression of a decisive change in sensibility which occurred in the late eighteenth century. He argues that up until this time irony was a stable rhetorical device (by which a speaker intimated the opposite of what he was saying). But with Friedrich Schlegel irony became enriched by the complex dimension of an author's relationship to his own creation. It was for this kind of irony that Schlegel praised *Wilhelm Meister* (at the same time wondering if Goethe would understand what he meant). And he was referring to irony as a structural principle, irony which issues in a kind of self-reflectivity in the novel. If the ground of that irony is the dialectic of the creative, inward potential of man on the one hand and on the other the necessary *donnée* of finite, palpable experience, then we can see that such irony is the articulation of vital issues inherent not only in the novel form but also in aesthetics, in philosophy, in history. This is perhaps why Hegel, in his comments on the novel, was so ambivalent precisely about the ironic constellation which he was expounding, why, when he incorporated references to a novel into his *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, they were to Diderot's *Le Neveu de Rameau*. For in this work Hegel perceived the situation of a mind unwilling to serve the values of society but unsure of its own integrity, seeking to realize itself in the complex modalities of its estrangement from the objective world. Lionel Trilling has superbly shown how Diderot's novel and Hegel's gloss on it are central to any understanding of the issues of selfhood, sincerity, authenticity in their (and our) time. In the novel's oscillation between potentiality and actuality—and it was that oscillation which Hegel saw as constitutive of *Bildung*—it enacts the deepest spiritual issues of its age. Moreover, we would do well to remember that Hegel was not alone in his admiration of *Le Neveu de Rameau*. It claimed both the interest and the active engagement of the translation process from none other than Goethe himself. This would, at the very least, suggest the improbability that Goethe's own *Wilhelm Meister* is an unproblematic pilgrimage toward human wholeness and fulfillment. But perhaps it might be felt that all this talk about irony is becoming rather

heavyweight, not to say teutonically mystical. For Hegel, of course, every aspect of human experience was reducible to that ironic field of force in which mind and facts, idea and actuality intersect.

Let me then turn to less heady versions of the argument about irony and the novel. It has been shown, most cogently by Ian Watt, that the breakthrough in sensibility that makes the novel possible in the eighteenth century has to do with a perception of the *specific* nature of experience, with the individuality and particularity of the vital criteria which determine significance and truthfulness. In other words, in respect of narrative forms, the eighteenth century witnesses the breakdown of a stable, public rhetoric in favor of a private language in which the narrator appeals to the reader's own experience as epistemological authority. Wolfgang Kayser and others have argued that the birth of the modern novel is linked to the emergence of an overtly *personal* narrator. In theoretical terms, this entails a repudiation of the romance in favor of some more truthful (that is, unstable and personal) mode of narrative discourse. Let me take an example from Ian Watt's discussion of *Moll Flanders*. Watt points out the irony which results from a discrepancy between the experiences narrated and the kinds of values which the successful Moll, as recollecting narrator, espouses. He then goes on to ask how far this irony is, as it were, an articulated situation, or how far it is largely unreflected in the sense that the irony is there for us, the readers, but not for the characters. He concludes that the latter is the case, that *Moll Flanders* "is undoubtedly an ironic object, but it is not a work of irony." With this assessment I would agree. And I want to borrow Watt's categories and to risk a somewhat large generalization. If much English novel writing is, as would commonly be argued, realistic in spirit—that is, sustained by the imaginative concern to recreate and thereby to understand society, its pressures, its economic and moral sanctions, its institutions and norms—then it is a fiction that operates with what J. P. Stern has called the "epistemological naivety" of realism. The social context is taken as given—it is so much the *donnée* of the novelist's art that it is not the subject of epistemological scrutiny. Now of course, in documenting the clash between individual values and social norms, between personal aspirations and the actuality of society, the realistic novel does not emerge with stable,

reassuring assessments of the way its characters live, move, and have their being. Indeed, it is one of the hallmarks of the realistic novel as we know it that it reveals the jostling norms of the social and moral situation which it so persuasively evokes. But the realistic novel is concerned to reflect the jostling—rather than to reflect on the norms themselves. The result is the novel as “ironic object.” And this I take to be as true of Defoe as it is of Balzac or Dickens. But I want to suggest that the Bildungsroman, although it may display a whole number of naïvetés, does not suffer from *epistemological* naïveté. It is highly self-aware in respect of the interplay of values which it so unremittingly explores and articulates within the hero’s experience. Hence, its irony is qualitatively different; it is irony as structural principle; it is the novel whose self-awareness generates the “work of irony” (in Watt’s sense).

Here we arrive at the central objection to the German novel tradition: its lack of realism. There are two points I wish to make in answer to this charge. First, it seems to me a falsity to assume that the novel has to be wedded to the tenets of literary realism in order to be truly a novel. A number of recent studies of the novel have shown that the genre can appropriately be a self-conscious form in which referentiality of import is anything but the be-all and end-all. Moreover, it has been suggested that the realistic novel is but one, historically circumscribed, possibility within a much more durable and continuous tradition. Second, I want to insist that the concerns of the German Bildungsroman are recognizably part of the overall situation of the nineteenth-century European novel. The conflict between individual aspirations and the resistant presence of practical limitations is as much a theme within, say, the Victorian novel as it is within the Bildungsroman. But with a difference. Within the framework of literary realism, this conflict finds palpable, outward enactment, and human growth and development is plotted on a graph of moral understanding; whereas in the German novel tradition, the tension between *Nebeneinander* and *Nacheinander* is essentially a debate about the coordinates of human cognition, and the issues raised are epistemological rather than moral, are embedded in the narrator’s (and reader’s) capacity for reflectivity. If the German Bildungsroman is a legitimate voice within the European novel as bourgeois

epic, then it has something to tell even English readers about the inherent potentialities of the novel form. Moreover, we should not forget that English novel theory changes in the second half of the nineteenth century, moving away from the unambiguous commitment to realism towards a greater concern for what Arnold called “the application of ideas to life.” Stang and Graham have both highlighted the emergence in the 1880s of the so-called novel of ideas or philosophical romance. If the English novel theory of the 1750s (in the famous remarks of Dr. Johnson and Fielding) had repudiated the romance, by the 1880s the wheel had come full circle. And, as Elinor Shaffer has recently shown, a novel such as George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* (1876) is vitally informed by a complex indebtedness to Goethe, to *Wilhelm Meister*, to the particular tradition of higher (that is, mythological) criticism in Germany; and thereby the strenuous moral concern of the English novel tradition interlocks with a mythopoeic consciousness, with a density of spiritual and cultural reflectivity which sustains—and is sustained by—the lives which that novel chronicles.

I hope I have said enough to suggest that the Bildungsroman should no longer be dismissed as a narrowly German exercise in the novel mode. For it is, in my view, a narrative genre that raises problems to do with character and selfhood in the novel, to do with plot, to do with the relationship between narrator and reader which can enrich our understanding of the possibilities of the novel form. Above all else, it can differentiate our awareness of how the novel can convey and explore the life of the mind, for the Bildungsroman is not simply an allegorical scenario of philosophical positions and values. No other novel form is so engaged creatively by the play of values and ideas; yet at the same time no other novel form is so tough in its refusal to hypostatize consciousness, thinking, insight as a be-all and end-all. (Hence that insistent presence of the *Nacheinander* on which I have laid such emphasis.) No other novel has been so fascinated by the creative inner potential in man—hence its fondness for artists or cryptoartists as protagonists—yet no other novel has seen the artistic sensibility as one involving a whole set of epistemological problems that are not susceptible of easy, practical solutions.

Now of course, this concern for the life of the mind is not confined only to the novel in German literature. English readers have often felt that German culture generally is heavily philosophical (shades of the Mikado's objections!). There is much truth to this—but it can also gravely mislead. And I want to insist that German literature is philosophical not in the sense that it has a philosophical scheme which it wants to impose but rather in that it asks after the place of philosophizing, of reflectivity, in living. Ultimately its finest products always suggest that consciousness and being are inextricably intertwined; that consciousness is not a realm serenely encapsulated from the stresses and strains of living.

Source: Martin Swales, "Irony and the Novel: Reflections on the German Bildungsroman," in *Reflection and Action: Essays on the Bildungsroman*, edited by James Hardin, University of South Carolina Press, 1991, pp. 46–68.

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FURTHER READING

Buckley, Jerome Hamilton, *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding*, Harvard University Press, 1974.

A study of the Bildungsroman in British literature that reviews a dozen major novels and several minor ones, this book shows the wide variations achieved in the genre.

Castle, Gregory, *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman*, University Press of Florida, 2006.

Castle provides a unique review and analysis of English and Irish Bildungsroman novels in the context of modern ideas and modern writing styles.

Deck, Alice A., "Ten Is the Age of Darkness: The Black Bildungsroman," in *African American Review*, Vol. 33, Issue 1, Spring 1999, pp. 159–161.

This article is a review and synopsis of Geta LeSeur's book that examines the successful use of the Bildungsroman genre by black authors in the United States and the Caribbean.

Kontje, Todd Curtis, *The German Bildungsroman: History of a National Genre*, Camden House, 1993.

This book is a critical overview of the Bildungsroman from the 1790s to the 1990s. Kontje examines the history and culture surrounding the origin of the genre, the connection of the genre to German nationalism, the reaction of critics during the fascist period, and the eventual use of the genre throughout world literature.

Kornfeld, Eve, and Susan Jackson, "The Female Bildungsroman in Nineteenth-Century America: Parameters of a

Vision,” in *Journal of American Culture*, Vol. 10, No. 4, Winter 1987, pp. 69–75.

This article discusses *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* and several other examples of the female Bildungsroman with the premise that these works about women by women created a unique world for women and sent a distinctive message.

Minden, Michael, *The German Bildungsroman: Incest and Inheritance*, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

This book offers a critical examination of the genre that considers social, psychological, and gender themes. Each chapter discusses a different German novel's plot, themes, and scholarly criticism.