

The Literary Image of Man in the Process of Becoming: Variations of the Bildungsroman Genre in English and American Literature

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ABSTRACT

This article¹ briefly outlines a history of Bildungsroman and provides an overview of theories of the genre and a critical assessment of them. It argues that the genre, notwithstanding some critical opinions to the contrary, is still a very potent literary form despite the fact that it came into existence in a particular historical and literary situation of eighteenth-century Germany. The genre's flexibility allowed for variations and modifications that ensured its contemporary viability in Anglo-American literatures. While the concern with the individual's emergence from an immature state of childhood to adult maturity, and with individual's socialization remaining the core focus of the Bildungsroman, studies of the form have lately become involved in the discussions of ethnic and racial identification, of biculturalism, of the situation of an individual in a liminal position. This makes Bildungsroman a genre especially important in contemporary American literature.

KEYWORDS

Literary genre; Bildungsroman; Bildungsroman in English; female Bildungsroman; ethnic Bildungsroman

Traditionally, childhood is seen as a "significant site of analysis because children are primarily seen as passive receptors of culture" and thus children "function as the scavengers and inheritors of an eviscerated culture."² In such a view, a child grows up simply by realizing a culturally inherited potential, then becomes an adult by replicating the norms, roles, modes of behavior, as well as cultural expression of previous generations. Karl Mannheim in his essay "The Problem of Generations" (1952) argues that such a process of growing up can only exist in stable, traditional societies with little or no change in within several generations. Mannheim calls this phenomenon "pre-scribed youth" that "knows no entelechy" and thus is culturally insignificant or almost invisible.³ However, with the dramatic changes of industrialization and urbanization that began changing the world drastically from one generation to the next, one can no longer grow up simply by following the lead of the previous generation. Thus "the colorless and uneventful socialization of the 'old' youth becomes increasingly implausible" and in fact the very process of growing up becomes a problem, "one that makes youth itself problematic."⁴

1 This article's title is taken from Mikhail Bakhtin, "The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel)" in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 19.

2 Karen Sánchez-Eppler, *Dependent States: the Child's Part in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), xv.

3 As quoted in Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London, New York: Verso, 2000), 4.

4 Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 4.

A new kind of protagonist then enters literature – a young hero depicted in an often painful and difficult stage of transition from childhood to adulthood. This is not to say that young literary figures had never existed before, but what distinguishes these from the new youthful hero is the modern focus on youth as important stage of life, one that to a large degree determines what the adult will be, or, in the words of Franco Moretti, "youth is both a necessary and sufficient definition of these heroes,"⁵ and the "changes in the hero himself acquire plot significance."⁶

As Tobias Boes has pointed out, this also corresponds to another important aspect of this paradigmatic change, namely to a shift in the understanding of history, to the birth of "the idea that 'history' might itself have a 'story', and that its basic determining factors might themselves be in motion."⁷ So when speaking about the protagonists of the Bildungsroman, Bakhtin names time as important element: "Time is introduced into man, enters into his very image, changing in a fundamental way the significance of all aspects of his destiny and life."⁸

The Roots

The genre of Bildungsroman grows out of traditional heroic narrative; its plot is derived from quest and initiation motifs, from the "idea of testing" as Bakhtin calls it.⁹ As referred to in the title of this article, the Bildungsroman's main theme is, according to Bakhtin, the "image of man in the process of becoming" and thus Bildungsroman is "the novel of human emergence."¹⁰ Literary historians agree that it is Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* [Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship] (1796) that codifies the turn towards youth. The work "intends to relate the individual formation of its protagonist to the historical development of the era,"¹¹ thus marking the beginning of the genre of Bildungsroman. Moretti considers it symptomatic that the new kind of youthful protagonist appears for the first time in a work that codifies the new paradigm and understands youth to be "the most meaningful part of life." He concludes that Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* thus "marks simultaneously the birth of the Bildungsroman (the form which will dominate or, more precisely, make possible the Golden Century of Western narrative) and of a new hero."¹² Characters such as Elizabeth Bennet, Julien Sorel, Waverly, David Copperfield, Dorothea Brooke are other examples of the new protagonists for who "youth is both a necessary and sufficient definition."¹³

5 Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 4.

6 Mikhail Bakhtin, "The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel)" in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 21.

7 Tobias Boes, "Apprenticeship of the Novel: The Bildungsroman and the Invention of History, CA. 1770-1820." *Comparative Literature Studies*. 45 no. 3 (2008): 273.

8 Bakhtin, "The Bildungsroman," 21.

9 Bakhtin, "The Bildungsroman," 16.

10 Bakhtin, "The Bildungsroman," 21.

11 Boes, "Apprenticeship of the Novel," 274.

12 Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 3.

13 Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 4.

The term *Bildungsroman* appears in the first decades of the 20th century which, quite naturally, collides with the establishing of the modern academic study of literature.¹⁴ However, as Fritz Martini claims, the term itself was coined early in the nineteenth century by Karl (von) Morgenstern, a less known professor of rhetoric and history of literature and art at the University of Dorpat.¹⁵ Susan Freiman states that the term “is said to have been suggested by Friedrich von Blackenburg’s discussion of *Bildung* in his 1774 ‘Essay on the Novel’.”¹⁶

According to Francois Jost, the word *Bildung* is until the eighteenth century synonymous with the terms *Bild* or *imago* which both mean *portrait*, and thus the expression *Bildung* used in the pedagogical or educational sense denotes the “process by which a human being becomes a replica of his mentor.” This concept is clearly rooted in the biblical tradition of the man created in the image of God.¹⁷ As Pin-chia Feng summarizes, “the term *Bildung* implies an endorsement of patrilineage.”¹⁸ Gunilla Theander Kester explains that the term *Bildung* describes a double process – *Anbildung* and *Ausbildung* – in which each individual emerges as a unique being with their own characteristics, qualities, talents, weaknesses, as well as the process in which a society accepts and embraces the individual as part of itself.¹⁹

Although coined early in the nineteenth century, the term *Bildungsroman* did not become widely used until Wilhelm Dilthey popularized it at the turn of the century. In English-speaking academia, the term *Bildungsroman* did not appear in dictionaries and literary handbooks until the 1950s²⁰ although German works written in the form had been translated earlier. Freiman explores how “the transposition of the term and concept from one national literature to another” happened and with what consequences²¹.

The late general adoption of the term itself is the reason why most authors of novels we now label as traditional *Bildungsromane* did not consciously work in the genre, nor even knew the term.²² Thus for example Marc Redfield concludes that the term *Bildungsroman* is in a way “empty.” It is a literary and critical “phantom”²³ or “pseudo term” that is applied retrospectively onto a group of mostly German texts from the eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

However, the roots of the genre can be also traced into the Romantic interest in individuality and youth. Jerome Buckley mentions Wordsworth as the first author

who “gave prolonged and serious attention” to stages of human life, including youth.²⁴ In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth tried to capture the memories of childhood because he believed that “the child was father of the man” and “the defined attributes of the child’s character would somehow build a bridge over the troubled currents of adolescence to a more stable maturity.”²⁵ Similarly, Buckley states, *Don Juan* by another important romantic writer George Byron, can be seen, despite being iconoclastic, as focusing on the troublesome transition from boyhood to mature adulthood. However, “*Don Juan*, like *The Prelude* in a quite different way, anticipated rather than directly influenced the Victorian autobiographical novel of youth.”²⁶

The focus on youth, on literary characters in the process of maturing, is, from a historical perspective, rather new. Moretti believes it is precisely at the dawn of the modern times that this interest arises as the continuity between generations is dismantling and “the new and destabilizing forces of capitalism impose a hitherto unknown mobility” yet at the same time call for more inner exploration, “thereby generating interiority.”²⁷ Thus, Moretti concludes, *mobility* and *interiority* are among the most significant features of modern youth depicted in the *Bildungsroman*. The genre as such becomes to Moretti “the symbolic form of modernity.”²⁸

Bildungsroman is necessarily an “intrinsically contradictory” form²⁹ because it is built on sharp contradictions between dynamism and limitations, relentlessness and a sense of quick passing of time (as youth is indeed brief), tensions between certainty and insecurity, identity and change.³⁰ Boes similarly sees a contradiction in the genre, as any *Bildungsroman* in order to fulfill the requirements of Aristotelian poetics “ends with its own negation, a state in which development is arrested and mundane reality suddenly yields a hidden immanent meaning.”³¹

James Hardin also mentions a certain inner tension or contradiction inherent in the genre. Following Lukács and others, Hardin has chosen the terms *action* and *reflection* as the two most important characteristics of the genre of *Bildungsroman*. “Reflectiveness, preoccupation with matters of the development of mind and soul, are obviously key elements of the genre [...] but action is also important.”³² According to Lukács, the classical narrative (epic) was possible in a world with universal meaning where “the writer was unalienated, not at odds with society” but as this universally meaningful world seized to exist, the epic was replaced by the novel and the characters of the epic were substituted by novel’s protagonists “who are essentially searching for the lost meaning of life.”³³ Thus we can define two opposites of the novel genre – the abstract-idealistic novel in which the protagonist actively confronts the world, and the novel of reflection wherein a disillusioned protagonist withdraws from the world into his inner recesses. If one accepts this division by Lukács, Hardin concludes, one can see that the *Bildungsroman*

14 By modern study of literature I mean the historically quite recent way of studying and interpreting texts in terms of their literary (and perhaps cultural) value and merits rather than learning them as paradigms of correct speech, language usage and style, or as wells of wisdom and knowledge accumulated over generations (as was common for centuries). See for example Bubíková, 2007, 15-30.

15 Fritz Martini, “*Bildungsroman* – Term and Theory,” in *Reflection and Action: Essays on the Bildungsroman*, ed. James N. Hardin (University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 2-4.

16 Susan Freiman, *Unbecoming Women: British Women Novelist and the Novel of Development* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 3.

17 As quoted in Pin-chia Feng, *The Female Bildungsroman by Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1999), 3.

18 Feng, *The Female Bildungsroman*, 3.

19 Feng, *The Female Bildungsroman*, 43, n. 4.

20 Freiman, *Unbecoming Women*, 4.

21 See Freiman, *Unbecoming Women*, especially chapter one.

22 Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (Harvard University Press, 1975), viii.

23 Marc Redfield, *Phantom Formation: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996), xi.

24 Buckley, *Season of Youth*, 2.

25 Buckley, *Season of Youth*, 4.

26 Buckley, *Season of Youth*, 8.

27 Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 4.

28 Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 5.

29 Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 6.

30 Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 6-8.

31 Boes, “Apprenticeship of the Novel,” 279.

32 James N. Hardin, *Reflection and Action: Essays on the Bildungsroman* (University of South Carolina Press, 1991), viii.

33 Hardin, *Reflection and Action*, xv.

forms an important intermediating link which reconciles the problematic protagonist with particular social reality.³⁴

Because the genre of Bildungsroman contains not only reflection but action as well, describing particularly those changes connected with personal development or progress, its main focus is on temporal rather than spatial aspects. This is paralleled by the modern (particularly since the 19th century) preoccupation and understanding of the world and society in its historical, developmental perspectives. If time is of essential interest, literature then focuses on expressing meaning through events.

Thus although Bildungsroman as a literary form came into existence at a specific time of paradigmatic shift and the first works written in the genre were German novels, the form itself enabled the expression of new concepts and concerns that were far more universal. The form was soon adopted into other literatures, including English and American.

The Bildungsroman in English

Probably the first comprehensive attempt to use the German concept of the Bildungsroman to characterize features of the British literary tradition comes from the 1930s' work of Susanne Howe. Howe claimed an English legacy for the German tradition in her *Wilhelm Meister and His English Kinsmen: Apprentices to Life*. Here she defines the genre as having a straightforward sequencing, a generally optimistic form of development and informal educational objectives achieved by selected mentors, through a narrative mapping of the process from inexperience to experience. She concluded that although there was a tradition of the Bildungsroman in English literature, it was not nearly as significant a tradition as in German literature.³⁵ As Freiman points out, Howe characterizes the genre in "emphatically masculine terms – for the contemporaneous heroine's relation to choice, mentors and mastery is rather different" because the "myth of bourgeois opportunity has little place for the middle-class female protagonist."³⁶ Thus the groundwork of defining the genre of Bildungsroman within the English tradition had been done in a rather limiting way, and Freiman argues for a much wider tradition that would also include the development of female protagonists.

Other definitions and theories of the Bildungsroman genre include those by Jerome Hamilton Buckley, working along the same generic principles as Howe. He also tried to free the genre's definition from its close connectedness to the German literary tradition but in a way he, too, continued in what Freiman calls "the continual fetishizing of *Wilhelm Meister* as originary text"³⁷ and helped in establishing the canon of the genre as a set of "overwhelmingly male-authored and male-centered texts."³⁸ However, Ellen McWilliams points out that Buckley's study "made a powerful case for the existence of

a canon of Bildungsromane in English."³⁹ Buckley places the beginning of the genre's tradition in English in the works of Charles Dickens, namely *David Copperfield*. He mentions that Thackeray's *Pendennis* "has been called⁴⁰ the first true Bildungsroman in English fiction,"⁴¹ but dismisses this novel as a "singularly uneven" work that "achieves no sustained focus on either hero or theme."⁴² It is interesting to mention in this connection the fact that several English novels written before the publication of Goethe's opus can in fact be considered Bildungsromane, for example Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749) and Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-67).⁴³ Susan Freiman in her study of the female tradition of the genre starts with Frances Burney's *Evelina, or The History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* (1778), although she prefers to call it "an antiromantic narrative of female development."⁴⁴

In his characterization of the British tradition of the genre, Buckley claims that while the German Bildungsromane contain the more or less conscious efforts of the protagonist at self-cultivation and self-education through experience and study, in the English tradition this motif is less pronounced; these works are less connected with formal education. English Bildungsromane are more concerned with the flourishing of the imagination and awakening of artistic inclinations. Buckley names several key elements of the genre – "childhood, the conflict of generations, provinciality, the larger society, self-education, alienation, ordeal by love and the search for a vocation and a working philosophy"⁴⁵ and he even suggests a typical plot outline of English Bildungsroman: a boy "of some sensitivity"⁴⁶ grows up in a provincial town and at some point leaves his home "to make his way independently in the city," where he undergoes series of initiations and finally returns (or visits) "his old home to demonstrate [...] the degree of his success or the wisdom of his choice."⁴⁷ The protagonist is very often fatherless or is irrevocably alienated from his father. "The loss of the father," according to Buckley, "usually symbolizes or parallels a loss of faith in the values of the hero's home and family and leads inevitably to the search for a substitute parent or creed."⁴⁸ Similarly, Françoise Král summarizes the Bildungsroman's plot: an "archetypal hero [...] undergoes an identity crisis and wanders away from the family unit to develop his skills and fulfill his personal ambitions before returning and serving the community."⁴⁹

While some of the theory is indeed insightful, the way Buckley applies it is at least troublesome according to Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch and Elizabeth Langland.⁵⁰ Buckley uses only a handful of examples to illustrate his points and thus is naturally criticized by feminist scholars about the way he defines and outlines the common plot

34 Hardin, *Reflection and Action*, xvi.

35 Suzanne Howe, *Wilhelm Meister and His English Kinsmen: Apprentices to Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1930), 6. It is beyond the scope of this study to go into detail about the more recent history of Bildungsroman in German literature, as I am more concerned with the genre in context of English and especially American literature. For a survey of the German Bildungsroman see for example Kontje, Todd. *The German Bildungsroman: History of a National Genre*. Columbia: Camden House, 1993; or Swales, Martin. *The German Bildungsroman from Wieland to Hesse*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978.

36 Freiman, *Unbecoming Women*, 5-6.

37 Freiman, *Unbecoming Women*, 9-10.

38 Freiman, *Unbecoming Women*, 10.

39 Ellen McWilliams, *Margaret Atwood and the Female Bildungsroman* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 12.

40 By Gordon N. Ray in *Thackeray: The Age of Wisdom* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1958).

41 Buckley, *Season of Youth*, 28.

42 Buckley, *Season of Youth*, 29.

43 Sterne's novel can in fact be seen as a parody of the genre of Bildungsroman.

44 Freiman, *Unbecoming Women*, 34.

45 Buckley, *Season of Youth*, 18.

46 Buckley, *Season of Youth*, 17.

47 Buckley, *Season of Youth*, 18.

48 Buckley, *Season of Youth*, 19.

49 Françoise Král, *Critical Identities in Contemporary Anglophone Diasporic Literature* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 28.

50 Abel, Elizabeth, Marianne Hirsch and Elizabeth Langland (eds.), *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development* (Hanover: University Press of New England for Dartmouth College, 1983).

of the genre, suggesting that all *Bildungsromane* are written by male authors about male protagonist's development (the inclusion of George Elliot into Buckley's discussion does not truly provide an argument to the contrary as George Elliot herself wrote under male pseudonym and tried not to be distinguishable as a female writer). Buckley fell into the same trap of a limited view of the genre as Howe, since his definition of the genre "presupposes social options available only to men," thus basically excluding the possibility of a female protagonist. Further, as Feng aptly summarizes, Buckley "describes 'human' development exclusively in male terms."⁵¹

Thus Buckley repeats the impression already given by Howe's analysis, that Bildungsroman concerns exclusively the maturation process of male protagonists. Buckley highlights this assertion by further claiming that, especially during the Victorian era, the Bildungsroman was often "the equivalent of the Renaissance conduct book insofar as one of its recurrent themes is the making of a gentleman."⁵² On the other hand, in the post-industrialization era the process of becoming a gentleman means to survive in the chaotic urban world. Contrary to Buckley's suggestion of a typical plot, in contemporary Bildungsromane many protagonists do not run away from the oppressive atmosphere of their (provincial) home into a city but are often frustratingly entrapped in urban ghettos and might be, in fact, missing the roots and traditions of home and family rather than needing to escape them. Claude Brown's autobiographical Bildungsroman *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1965) stands out as a particularly suited example of a youth growing up in a ghetto.

Nevertheless, this is not the end of the list of questionable generic aspects that Buckley names. Similarly, the Oedipal conflict between protagonists and their fathers that according to Buckley usually sets the plot in motion, hardly fits "the life pattern of women and minority people."⁵³ The mother-daughter relationship as discussed in many contemporary female Bildungsromane is too complex to fit the oedipal description. The motif of two exalting and awakening sexual experiences that Buckley finds in the texts he analyzes does not appear in many other novels of the genre, particularly in female Bildungsromane. Freiman points out that "in the formation of the female [protagonists], by contrast, sex plays a less positive role."⁵⁴ Feng goes even further when she says: "Sexuality in the female Bildungsroman is more often debasing and handicapping than exalting."⁵⁵ In short while Buckley's study certainly offers an interesting and informed reading of several texts that contribute to the tradition of Bildungsroman in English, he falls short of providing a definition or generic analysis that would be applicable to more texts of the genre.

Likewise Jeffrey L. Sammons, by proposing a very narrow definition of the term, limits its existence to a certain time period and a geographical location:

I think that the Bildungsroman should have something to do with Bildung, that is, with the early bourgeois, humanistic concept of the shaping of the individual self from its innate potentialities through acculturation and social experience to the threshold of maturity.⁵⁶

51 Feng, *The Female Bildungsroman*, 5.

52 Buckley, *Season of Youth*, 20.

53 Feng, *The Female Bildungsroman*, 6.

54 Freiman, *Unbecoming Women*, 7.

55 Feng, *The Female Bildungsroman*, 7.

56 Jeffrey L. Sammons, "The Bildungsroman for Nonspecialists: An Attempt at a Clarification." in *Reflection and Action: Essays on the Bildungsroman*, ed. James N. Hardin (University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 41.

To him the Bildungsroman no longer really exists, if it ever did - Sammons admits the genre had never been a dominant form, but a "peripheral, occasional, and usually imperfectly realized subgenre,"⁵⁷ one that emerged in the late eighteenth century, "flourishe[d] briefly in the age of Goethe and Romanticism," then, with few exceptions, almost disappeared in the nineteenth century and "re-emerge[d] in the modernist neo-Romantic revival" of the twentieth century.⁵⁸

Contrary to Sammons, Franco Moretti considered the Bildungsroman important during a certain period of time, including the nineteenth century, in which the genre had three main symbolic tasks:

It had contained the unpredictability of social change, representing it through the fiction of youth: a turbulent segment of life, no doubt, but with a clear beginning, and an unmistakable end. At a micro-narrative level, furthermore, the structure of the novelistic episode had established the flexible, anti-tragic modality of modern experience. Finally, the novel's many-sided, unheroic hero had embodied a new kind of subjectivity: everyday, worldly, pliant - normal.⁵⁹

As Moretti closely associated the genre with modernity, he also saw its end coincide with close of the "long" 19th century. He considered *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch* by George Eliot along with Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* as the last masterpieces of the genre.⁶⁰ Moretti calls "novels from the turn of the century that are usually also considered Bildungsromane such as *America* by Franz Kafka, *Tonio Kroger* by Thomas Mann or Joyce's *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, late Bildungsromane." To him these differ from the earlier form in their depiction of society. While in the traditional Bildungsroman the society was seen as a net of relationships between individuals, now it becomes a system of institutions, and the protagonist is confronted with their impersonal, incomprehensible, even monstrous existence. "The world of the late Bildungsroman has solidified into impersonal institutions, while youth has become more vulnerable, and reluctant to grow."⁶¹ This to Moretti shows that the genre was already "doomed" at the beginning of the 20th century and died shortly afterwards: "If history can make cultural forms necessary, it can make them impossible as well, and this is what the war [WWI] did to the Bildungsroman."⁶² Because many critics defined the genre in a very narrow way and used only a few texts from certain time period to support their definitions, they also saw the genre as a brief episode in the history of modern literature. Not only Sammons and Moretti but also Wilhelm Dilthey⁶³ and Fritz Martini suggest that the genre should be considered exclusively a historical phenomenon of the 18th-century Germany.⁶⁴

While critics mostly agree that the genre starts with Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, they usually differ in their opinion on the durability of the tradition. Often they see the Bildungsroman as limited to a certain time period (sometimes even to a geographical area or national literature) and often suggest it is no longer viable. David Miles even

57 Sammons, "The Bildungsroman," 43.

58 Sammons, "The Bildungsroman," 32.

59 Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 230.

60 Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 12.

61 Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 233.

62 Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 229.

63 See Hardin, *Reflection and Action*, xiv.

64 Martini, "Bildungsroman," 24.

finds a particular date when the form died: "Gunter Grass' parody of Bildungsroman, *The Tin Drum*, signals absolute end to the genre."⁶⁵

Female and Ethnic Bildungsroman

As already suggested, many critics and literary historians have worked with a very limited set of texts, usually German, with male protagonists. Following Howe's and Buckley's lead, discussions of genre moved across the Atlantic and the American Bildungsroman similarly centered on "texts written by and about white men, such as Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* [...], and works by Henry James, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, J.D. Salinger, etc."⁶⁶

However, this is not the only tradition of the genre. There has been a long tradition of the female Bildungsroman that was not fully recognized until the second wave of feminist criticism.⁶⁷ Susan Freiman for example identifies the narration of female development presented in conduct and courtesy books written between 1760s and 1840s as the source of the female Bildungsroman of the 19th century, as these books "mark out a discursive context"⁶⁸ for later works written by female authors about a female protagonist's development into adulthood.⁶⁹ Eve Tavor Bannet sees the emergence of the female tradition of the Bildungsroman as closely connected with the rise of the novel itself. She points out an interesting implication of the word *Bildung* in this connection:

During the last decades of the eighteenth century in England, the language of Bildung – the language of instruction, of moral, and sentimental education, and of self-cultivation – was applied, not to the lives of the characters in the novels, but to the desired effect of novels on the lives and characters of their largely female readership.⁷⁰

Rita Felski considers the genre's rising popularity connected with opening of opportunities for women to study and to have a career, and also as a parallel to the decline of the traditional male Bildungsroman happening at the same time.

One of the first collections of theoretical work on the female Bildungsroman was *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*, edited by Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch and Elizabeth Langland, which both traces the tradition and brings together essays offering theoretical alternatives to the works of Buckley, Moretti, Sammons and others. However, rather than calling the novels depicting the coming-of-age of a female protagonist "female Bildungsromane" as counterpoints to "male Bildungsromane" Susan Freiman terms them novels of development to suggest that, as ideas of womanhood were changing, particularly during the 19th and early 20th century, literary depictions naturally had different features than the traditional Bildungsroman defined in masculine terms. Freiman simply jettisons the term *female Bildungsroman* in order to release the discussion from its

65 As quoted in Feng, *The Female Bildungsroman*, 10.

66 Samina Najmi, "Decolonizing the Bildungsroman," in *Form and Transformation in Asian American Literature*, edited by Zhou Xiaojing and Samina Najmi (Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 2005), 211.

67 Pin-chia Feng even states that "in view of the phenomena of critical rediscovery and the blossoming popularity of the female Bildungsroman in the 1960s and 70s, Miles's 1974 and Sammons's 1981 essays indeed appear reactionary." Feng, *The Female Bildungsroman*, 10.

68 Freiman, *Unbecoming Women*, 13.

69 For the entire discussion see Freiman, pp. 13-28.

70 As quoted in Feng, *The Female Bildungsroman*, 11.

"Goethan baggage" and to see the genre simply as developmental fiction or novel of formation, whether or not the protagonist is female or male.⁷¹

Probably the most interesting form of contemporary Bildungsroman is American female ethnic Bildungsroman, i.e. a novel that focuses on the growing up of a female member of American ethnic minority. Gwendolyn Brooks's novel *Maud Martha* (1953)⁷² can be regarded as a forerunner to many American black female Bildungsromane. In its treatment of a first encounter with racism as initiation, its depiction of the world divided into binary oppositions of black and white, working and middle class, domestic and public, it precedes Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), Toni Morrison's *Sula* and *The Bluest Eye*, Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo* (1982) and *Betsy Brown* (1985). Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1977) is a Bildungsroman about the growing up of a Chinese-American girl coming to terms with her bi-cultural heritage. *The House on Mango Street* (1984) by Sandra Cisneros presents the coming-of-age story of an impoverished Latina girl. The poetic tone and formal structuring of Cisneros' novel into short episodes was also anticipated in *Maud Martha. Annie John* (1985) by Jamaica Kincaid dealing with Caribbean childhood can be named as another example of ethnic female Bildungsroman.

It is not surprising to find Ellen Morgan, in the early 1970s, claiming the female Bildungsroman as "the most salient form for literature influenced by neo-feminism"⁷³ and a platform for female empowerment, a decade later Barbara Anne White considering it "the most popular form of feminist fiction."⁷⁴ The late 1990s saw the publication of Gish Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land* (1997), a truly multicultural Bildungsroman in which the Chinese-American protagonist is no longer exposed to racism but freely explores identity as a mixture of inborn, adapted and chosen features. The novel illustrates the paradigmatic shift in the acceptance of ethnicity within American culture, the contemporary celebration of it, the fashionable "going ethnic".⁷⁵

The form has gradually taken its place in British literary tradition as well. *The Unbelonging* (1985) by Joan Riley not only related the story of an individual girl's coming of age but also provided the Afro-Caribbean community in Britain with literary visibility. The protagonist, eleven-year-old Hyacinth, faces racial abuse after she moves from Jamaica to Britain. Not accepted by her stepmother and feeling unwelcome by her classmates, Hyacinth's innocence is finally crippled by sexual abuse from her father. Set in the 1970s, some of the book's issues parallel those of Toni Morrison's highly acclaimed novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970), a Bildungsroman addressing the devastating effects of internalized racism on the process of growing up of an African-American girl. Another example of British female ethnic Bildungsroman is Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* (1996) that tells the story of Meena Kumar, daughter of Indian immigrants living in a small town in the English Midlands.

71 Freiman, *Unbecoming Women*, 13.

72 For a more detailed discussion of the novel as part of the tradition of American Bildungsromane see Šárka Bubíková, "Maud Martha and the tradition of ethnic female Bildungsroman," *Litteraria Pragensia* 21.41 (2011): 7-21.

73 Ellen Morgan, "Humanbecoming: Form and Focus in the Neo-Feminist Novel," in *Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspective*, edited by Susan Koppelman Cornillon (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1972), 185.

74 Barbara Anne White, *Growing up Female: Adolescent Girlhood in American Fiction* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985), 195.

75 For more on Gish Jen's novel see Šárka Bubíková, "Growing Up and the Quest for Identity," in *Literary Childhoods*, Šárka Bubíková et al. (Pavel Mervart & Univerzita Pardubice, 2008), 97-114.

The recent interest in ethnic and racial identity as expressed in the Bildungsroman genre is natural, since, as Georgia Warnke explains, “racial identifications and identities are ways of understanding who and what we and others are.”⁷⁶ To reflect the genre’s contemporary focus on the formation of ethnic identity, some critics have coined the term *ethnic Bildungsroman* in order to discuss novels depicting specifically the coming-of-age of a member of ethnic minority. Bonnie Hoover Braendlin describes the ethnic Bildungsroman as depicting “the particular identity and adjustment problems of people whose sex or color renders them unacceptable to the dominant society.”⁷⁷ These novels express the protagonist’s “struggle for individuation and a part in the American dream, which society simultaneously offers and denies them.”⁷⁸ Braendlin concludes:

This new Bildungsroman asserts an identity defined by the outsiders themselves or by their own cultures, not by the patriarchal Anglo-American power structure; it evinces a reevaluation, a transvaluation, of traditional *Bildung* by new standards and perspectives.⁷⁹

Thus what Braendlin and Martin Japtok also call the ethnic Bildungsroman is a very potent genre that allows explorations of the issues of ethnicity, identity, mainstream society versus group versus the individual; it questions many common assumptions about issues such as identity formation, ethnicity, assimilation. For example the contemporary British Bildungsroman *(Un)arranged Marriage* (2001) by Bali Rai, while describing the formative years in the life of a second-generation Panjabi-British boy Manny, also contains implicit discussions of what constitutes Britishness at the turn of the millennium, proposing – contrary to a national identity defined in terms of common ethnicity and language, a shared history, religion and culture – a new version of a nation, Habermasian⁸⁰ in its stress on the voluntary and desired membership in a community, and postnationalistic⁸¹ in its discussion of identity formed on the basis of democratic citizenship. In that respect, Rai’s Bildungsroman resonates themes common in American ethnic Bildungsromane that question the common assumptions about citizenship by presenting protagonists to whom civil rights are circumscribed on the basis of their skin color.

Martin Japtok addresses the question of how a genre that is largely individualistic in focus can be attractive to authors exploring the issues of identity and ethnicity. “The answer is that an assertion of individuality makes sense in the face of a denial of individuality, or even of humanity, because of one’s group affiliation.”⁸² In that way the ethnic Bildungsroman in fact exemplifies Adorno’s thesis in *Negative Dialectics* that the realm of the personal is already public and that efforts to clearly separate these two realms

cannot succeed. Ramón Saldívar even talks about “the myth of innocently separable ‘private’ and ‘public’ roles of the self.”⁸³ This myth is in fact effectively dismantled in contemporary coming-of-age narratives wherein the mutual influence and interdependence of roles frequently form an underlining, often implicit, central theme. An individual’s struggle for recognition and against prevailing stereotypes is presented, and in this way “a revision of mainstream views of ethnicity” is offered.⁸⁴ While the traditional Bildungsroman exclusively explores the development of an individual protagonist, the ethnic Bildungsroman gives more space and attention to group identity and social identity. Thus “ideological pressures work on the ethnic autobiography and Bildungsroman, pushing them towards a more communal worldview.”⁸⁵

However, even the traditional Bildungsroman depicts the process of socialization and hence does deal with the relationship between individual and society, with the pressures society exercises on the individual, with stereotypes and limits that are imposed on its members. Along the same lines, Bakhtin, in his early insightful (even if fragmentary) analysis of the genre states that “in it man’s individual emergence is inseparably linked to historical emergence.”⁸⁶ In this way, the genre is revolutionary since prior to it “man emerged, developed and changed within one epoch. [...] Man emerged but the world itself did not. [...] Man’s emergence was his private affair, as it were, and the results of this emergence were also private and biographical in nature.”⁸⁷ But in the Bildungsroman as exemplified by for example *Wilhelm Meister*, the protagonist “emerges along with the world.”⁸⁸ Since its beginnings then, the genre has the inherent potential for depicting the individual’s coming-of-age as interconnected with the development of a community or society. Thus the emerging protagonist’s selfhood is not only interesting in and of itself but gains importance as a representation and personification of the emergence of a particular (ethnic) group. As Ellen McCracken observes:

While certain writers narratively delineate the politics of the personal, others ultimately substitute the personal for the political. The texts that are most successful, however, integrate the personal and the political, the individual and the community, and link the personal empowerment to social empowerment rather than exaggerating subjectivity to focus on the first terms of these dichotomies.⁸⁹

Her comment might just as well explain the contemporary popularity of the genre of coming-of-age novel and its embracing by ethnic writers.

Because the ethnic Bildungsroman depicts complex relationships between individual, group and society, there is often a more political and social agenda involved, or, in the words of Japtok, American ethnic Bildungsromane bring “a more political and

76 Georgia Warnke, *After Identity: Rethinking Race, Sex, and Gender*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. p. 118.

77 Bonnie Hoover Braendlin, “Bildung in Ethnic Women Writers,” *Denver Quarterly* 17. 4 (Winter 1983): 75.

78 Braendlin, “Bildung in Ethnic Women Writers,” 75.

79 Braendlin, “Bildung in Ethnic Women Writers,” 75.

80 Similar remark was also made by Laila Amine in “A House with Two Doors? Creole Nationalism and Nomadism in Multicultural London,” *Culture, Theory & Critique* 48.1 (2007): 72. For further discussion see Jürgen Habermas, *The Postnational Constellation. Political Essays*, edited and translated by M. Pensky, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001.

81 See for example Dominique Leydet, “Citizenship”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2009 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2009/entries/citizenship/>>.

82 Martin Japtok, *Growing Up Ethnic: Nationalism and the Bildungsroman in African American and Jewish American Fiction* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005), 24.

83 As quoted in Ellen McCracken, *New Latina Narrative: The Feminine Space of Postmodern Ethnicity* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1999), 65.

84 Japtok, *Growing Up Ethnic*, 24.

85 Japtok, *Growing Up Ethnic*, 25.

86 Bakhtin, “The Bildungsroman,” 23.

87 Bakhtin, “The Bildungsroman,” 23.

88 Bakhtin, “The Bildungsroman,” 23.

89 McCracken, *New Latina Narrative*, 65. Although she says so in discussing Latina narratives, her statement is applicable to the genre of ethnic *Bildungsroman* as well.

social vision"⁹⁰ and so they "are politically charged and historically anchored."⁹¹ Although they continue in the classical Bildungsroman tradition - thus in Sammons's words they still have a lot in common with the "early bourgeois, humanistic concept of the shaping of the individual self [...] through acculturation and social experience"⁹² - these contemporary ethnic Bildungsromane present at the same time new and alternative, even challenging views on what socialization and acculturation in fact mean, and how personhood is shaped when it is complicated by the necessity to come to terms with (or choose between) ethnic and mainstream identity.

Conclusion

While Moretti sees the end of the genre of Bildungsroman at the beginning of the twentieth century, it is precisely this time period that according to Japtok witnesses the establishment of the American ethnic Bildungsroman.⁹³ By moving across the ocean, the genre had undergone yet another transformation, at certain instances almost turning into social documentary or taking up causes of racial and/or social protest. In the hands of other writers it becomes a powerful means for discussing a panoply of challenging and unsettling issues of the contemporary world. The fact that the genre can be adopted to serve these many purposes supports Freiman's reading of Northrop Frye that suggests that "genres are not in fact static."⁹⁴

The genre, developing for a most part of its history without arousing much critical attention, is now being widely researched and assessed. Not only is there a growing number of critical works written on the genre of Bildungsroman, there is also a growing body of texts being written in this form. Despite the critical death sentences, the genre is not dead but in fact flourishing.

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90 Japtok, *Growing Up Ethnic*, 27.

91 Geta LeSeur, *Ten Is the Age of Darkness: The Black Bildungsroman* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1995), 13.

92 Sammons, "The Bildungsroman," 41.

93 Japtok, *Growing Up Ethnic*, 28.

94 Freiman, *Unbecoming Women*, 1.

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